



From Orphanage to Entertainment Venue: Colonial and post-colonial Singapore reflected in the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus

by

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Abstract

By tracing the transformation of the site of the former Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, this thesis connects key issues and developments in the history of colonial and postcolonial Singapore. The convent, established in 1854 in central Singapore, is now the ‘premier lifestyle destination’, CHIJMES. I show that the Sisters were early providers of social services and girls’ education, with an orphanage, women’s refuge and schools for girls. They survived the turbulent years of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore and adapted to the priorities of the new government after independence, expanding to become the largest cloistered convent in Southeast Asia. In the 1980s, with urban redevelopment a priority for the new nation, the government acquired the site, demolished some buildings, and put the remainder out to private tender. The chapel and the former nuns’ residence are now classified as National Monuments.

Despite the classification, and in line with government policy of adaptive re-use of heritage buildings, the CHIJMES complex now contains numerous bars and restaurants, and the deconsecrated chapel is used for wedding receptions and other events. Tracking the physical and usage changes of the site, this thesis works to make sense of the journey from convent to entertainment venue. In a society that has undergone massive change economically and socially, and, above all, transitioned from colonial enterprise to wealthy independent city-state, the physical changes and differing usages of the site over the years echo the changes in the nation. The thesis thus uses the Convent/CHIJMES as a site for reading the changes in colonial and post-colonial Singapore.

My time period – 1854 to the present – spans the colonial era, including the disruption of the Japanese Occupation during World War Two, the immediate post-colonial period of independence, and the subsequent massive economic and physical development of Singapore into a world city. In a context of rapid change and globalisation, I also examine how the past is remembered in Singapore through the designation of National Monuments and historic sites, as well as how the Convent itself is remembered. The scope of the thesis necessitated an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on a broad range of scholarship, including history, social geography, religion, urban studies, heritage conservation and museum studies. In addition, I have analysed personal narratives, contemporary media reports and the visual record, using

historical and contemporary photographs. In examining a physical set of buildings, I approach the site as a text in which layers of meaning can be read, not only about the site itself, but about the development of Singapore.

The transformation of the site, from a wholly European institution into something more quintessentially Singaporean, offers an example which troubles some of the dichotomies about colonialism and about missionaries. The focus on French Catholic nuns in a British, and therefore Anglican, colony adds to the complexity of our understanding of colonialism, and I argue that the *laissez-faire* approach to free trade also extended to a tolerance of religious missions. The nuns' work with orphans, women seeking refuge, and in the education of girls, adds to the richness of our understanding of social issues in colonial Singapore, and demonstrates that they were women who actively contributed to the development of education and social welfare services. In this thesis, I argue that Singapore was both colonised and decolonised in ways that complicate the wider narrative of empire.

I also address the postcolonial impetus for industrialisation and urban redevelopment in the new nation and the initial privileging of development over heritage conservation. An examination of the acquisition of the site and its 'adaptive reuse' tells us much about the imagining of the new Singapore. The subsequent turn to heritage conservation in the 1980s and 1990s meant that many heritage buildings and sites have been preserved, and an examination of these national monuments and historic sites shows that Singapore has incorporated its colonial past into its national narrative in ways that differ from many other ex-colonies.

Despite a greater focus on heritage conservation, government policies of continued economic development have generated community angst about lost heritage and a nostalgia for the past. In a Singapore that is constantly changing its built environment, I argue that the recent changes at CHIJMES demonstrate not only the relentless developmentalism of the modern city-state, but also the fracture lines in the national narrative. I use the concept of a building as a palimpsest of meaning to show that past uses of buildings resurface at times and that redevelopment does not always erase emotional attachments to place.

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Abbreviations

ACM	Asian Civilisations Museum
BMA	British Military Administration
CHIJ	Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus
CPF	Central Provident Fund
FDSS	Floral Designers Society Singapore
HCA	Holy Childhood Association
HDB	Housing Development Board
IJS	Infant Jesus Sisters
LMS	London Missionary Society
MEP	Missions Étrangères de Paris (Paris Foreign Missions Society)
MPAJA	Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army
MRT	Mass Rapid Transit
NHB	National Heritage Board
NUS	National University of Singapore
OCA	Overseas Chinese Association
PAP	People's Action Party
PSM	Preservation of Sites and Monuments
SJI	St Joseph's Institution
STPM	Singapore Tourism Promotion Board
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
URA	Urban Redevelopment Authority

Glossary

Attap: Fronds from the palm, *Nypa fruticans*, were traditionally used as thatch on dwellings.

Convent: I have used this as a shorthand to refer to the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, in Victoria Street, Singapore, particularly prior to the change of use of the site into CHIJMES.

CHIJMES: Current name of the site in Victoria Street previously occupied by the Convent. It is pronounced ‘chimes’.

Dames de St Maur/Infant Jesus Sisters: From the seventeenth century, the Order was known as the ‘Charitable Mistresses of the Holy Infant Jesus, known as the Dames de St Maur’, and frequently shortened to the ‘Dames de St Maur’. ‘Sisters of the Holy infant Jesus’ and ‘Infant Jesus Sisters’ were introduced later. Recently, the more informal term, ‘IJ Sisters’ or ‘IJS’, is often used.

Heartland: The suburban towns of Singapore where most people live, usually in Housing Development Board flats. The term ‘heartlander’, used to describe residents of these areas, was popularised in 1999 by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.

Istana: Malay term for ‘palace’. Also the designation of the official residence and office of the President of Singapore and the office of the Prime Minister.

Nun, Sister: A nun is a member of a Catholic religious order of women who has taken solemn vows. A Sister is a member who has taken simpler vows. In modern usage, ‘nun’ is used to refer to all women religious, including those who are more properly called ‘sisters’.

Padang: Malay term for ‘field’ or ‘open ground’. Designated in Raffles’s Town Plan as a central open space and used for a range of sporting and ceremonial events.

Shophouse: A vernacular architectural building type common in many parts of urban Southeast Asia, comprising a shop on the ground floor and a residence above.

Sook Ching: Operation Sook Ching refers to the systematic elimination or purging of perceived anti-Japanese elements amongst the Chinese in Singapore by the Japanese military during World War Two. It took place from 18 February – 4 March 1942.

Introduction

From spiritual nourishment to spaghetti marinara

In Singapore in 1851, the French priest Father Beurel was working so enthusiastically to expand the Catholic faith that his Bishop has been described as being like ‘a frantic passenger trying to apply the handbrake to a vehicle that Father Beurel was driving towards the abyss of bankruptcy’.¹ The small island of Singapore, located just south of the Malayan peninsula and strategically placed on the shipping routes to India and China, had grown at a frenetic pace since Stamford Raffles negotiated a treaty on behalf of the British East India Company in 1819. The free port status attracted traders, merchants and workers from southern China and other parts of the British Empire, quickly transforming the small island of perhaps a few hundred residents into Raffles’s ambitious ‘great commercial emporium’ of the East.² Its status as a British East India Company trading post effectively meant that it was a British, and thus Anglican, colony. For Father Beurel, this meant a race with the Protestants for converts – he wrote to a fellow priest, Father Albrand: ‘Do I not see (the Protestants) running after children of every age and condition and drawing them into their schools? Are we to be their inferiors in this respect? They must not succeed’.³

Father Beurel needed teachers for any schools that he might be able to establish. Pursuing De La Salle Brothers (also known as Christian Brothers) as teachers for a boys’ school, he wrote to Albrand: ‘it is absolutely necessary that you procure me these Brothers or I shall have to come and fetch them myself’. He also wrote to the head of the Order of the Dames de St Maur (now known as the Infant Jesus Sisters) in Paris: ‘We want schools ... We want nuns. Will you give me some?’⁴ His persistence paid off, although he did have to fetch them himself, travelling to France to bring back six Brothers and four Sisters. With sea travel long

¹ Francis Brown, *Memories of SJI: Reminiscences of Old Boys and Past Teachers of St. Joseph's Institution, Singapore* (Singapore: SJI, 1987), 1.

² Thomas Stamford Raffles to Colonel Addenbrooke, quoted in Sophia Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Service of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), [1830]; 380.

³ Letter to Father Albrand, March 1848, quoted in Brown, *Memories of SJI*, 3. Also Rev. Brother Anthony, ed. *The Letters of Fr. J. M. Beurel Relating to the Establishment of St. Joseph's Institution, Singapore*. Translated by Rev. Br. Anthony (Penang: St. Xavier's Institution, 1987). Available on microfilm NA1334, National Archives of Singapore.

⁴ Lily Kong, Low Soon Ai, and Jacqueline Yip, *Convent Chronicles: History of a Pioneer Mission School for Girls in Singapore* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1994), 32.

and perilous, the Mother Superior died at sea, and the only English-speaking Sister fell in love on board the ship and subsequently left the Order.⁵ The remaining three Sisters were sent to Penang to await reinforcements from France. Finally, in 1854, the Sisters were able to establish the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) in Victoria Street, Singapore.

The school, orphanage and women's refuge established by the Infant Jesus Sisters were foundational early education and welfare services in Singapore and, indeed, in Malaya as a whole, as suggested by historian Denis Cooke:

By far the most significant event in the story of Roman Catholic education in Malaya...was the arrival, in 1852, of a handful of members of the two great teaching orders founded in France during the seventeenth century, the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus and the Christian Brothers. They were the first in the field in time, and have remained the first in importance.⁶

Today there are eleven CHIJ schools in Singapore, testifying to their continued contribution to girls' education. In recognition of this, the first Mother Superior, St. Mathilde Raclot, was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame in March 2014. The Hall of Fame celebrates 'the boundary breakers and record holders, the risk-takers and change-makers, the role models and the standard setters'.⁷ At first glance it may seem incongruous to describe a nun in this way, yet Mother Mathilde, and her companions, took enormous risks in travelling to the other side of the world to set up a French Catholic institution in an Anglican outpost, which had only been established for thirty-five years, and had a predominantly Chinese, Malay and Indian population. If Cooke is right that the Sisters have remained 'first in importance', then their contribution to the development of Singapore is worthy of study.

This thesis covers a broad sweep of history from the nineteenth century until the present day, examining a specific site in central Singapore, the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. Figure 1a below, the view from Victoria Street *ca*1910, shows the main gate, walls, Caldwell House on the far left, and the chapel which was completed in 1904. Figure 1b, the same view in 2014, shows the modification to the walls.

⁵ "Celebrating Mother Mathilde's bi-centenary", www.infantjesussisters.org/our-story/celebrating-mother-mathildes-bi-centenary, accessed 22 February 2015.

⁶ D. F. Cooke, "The Mission Schools of Malaya 1815-1942," *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 6, no. 2 (1966): 377.

⁷ <http://www.swhf.sg/about/an-overview>, accessed 9 November 2014. The Women's Hall of Fame was established by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations as a 'celebration of the women who have made, or are making, an impact on our nation'.

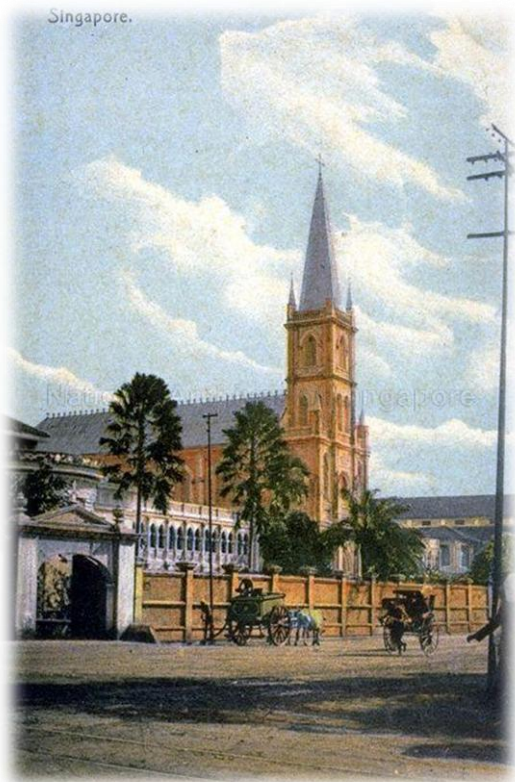


Figure 1a Postcard, c1910
Source: National Archives of Singapore



Figure 1b CHIJMES frontage, 2014
Source: Author

The Convent buildings expanded over the years to cover an entire city block – the largest cloistered convent in Southeast Asia.⁸ Figure 2 below shows its location in central Singapore, bounded by Victoria Street, Bras Basah Road, North Bridge Road and Stamford Road.

⁸ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 168.



Figure 2 Location in central Singapore 1990
Source: Urban Redevelopment Authority⁹

Physically, the Convent has changed substantially over time and those changes can tell us much, not only about the transformation of the Convent, but also about the transformation of Singapore. Architect Edward Hollis has argued that the discourse of architecture is a discourse of perfection, in which ‘the great buildings of the past are described as if the last piece of scaffolding has just been taken away, the paint is still fresh on the walls, and the ribbon has not yet been cut’.¹⁰ They are presented ‘as if ... history had not happened’. Yet ‘history’ has ‘happened’ at the Convent site. The Convent buildings over the years were added to, demolished, rebuilt and changed almost continuously. Despite being cloistered, they teemed with people, operating almost as a mini-city within the walls. For this was not a Convent of silent contemplation – it was a thriving community of schools, orphanage and refuge.

Ultimately the size and central location of the Convent site meant that it was attractive for urban redevelopment purposes in the 1980s. While the nuns were moved to new facilities in

⁹ Urban Redevelopment Authority, *CHIJ: Renewing an Old Masterpiece* (Singapore: URA, 1990).

¹⁰ Edward Hollis, *The Secret Lives of Buildings* (London: Portobello Books, 2009), 6.

suburban Singapore, I stay with the Victoria Street site and examine the partial demolition of Convent buildings and the subsequent tendering out of the site to private developers. The site's transformation into the CHIJMES (pronounced 'chimes') complex of today with bars and restaurants highlights the complex issues of heritage conservation in a rapidly globalised city-state. It also shows that meanings shift across time, summed up by this advertising pitch for one of the CHIJMES restaurants: 'Our first visitors came seeking spiritual nourishment. Nowadays it's the spaghetti marinara.'¹¹ This thesis works to make sense of that journey from colonial convent to entertainment venue. In a society that has undergone phenomenal change – in the built environment, economy, socially, and moved from colony to independence – the physical changes and differing usage of the site over the years track the changes in the nation. The Convent functions as a site for reading the changes in colonial and post-colonial Singapore.

In examining a physical set of buildings, I utilise an approach fruitfully used by scholars such as Shannon Jackson in her examination of Hull House in Chicago, Phillip Hoare with the Royal Victoria Military Hospital in Netley, and Margaret Visser with the church of St Agnes in Rome.¹² Like them, I am interested in the physicality of the Convent site, the 'biography' of the buildings. Restoration consultant Didier Repellin, who oversaw the conversion of the site into CHIJMES, summed it up this way:

A building like this is not only about stones and bricks, it is mainly human and human history. We have to understand all these to fully understand the buildings. The site is like a detective novel. It is full of mysteries which we must try to solve one by one.¹³

I approach the analysis not so much as a detective novel but rather as a text in which the layers of meaning can be carefully pulled back and exposed.

The Convent's story is also rooted in place. The Convent site, bounded by streets, is located within other bounded spaces – island, colony and the nation-state of Singapore. The human story spans the colonial era, including the disruption of the Japanese Occupation during

¹¹ Lily Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future: Urban Heritage in Singapore* (Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2011), 204. Unattributed publicity material from c2011.

¹² Shannon Jackson, *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity* (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 2000). Phillip Hoare, *Spike Island: The Memory of a Military Hospital* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002). Margaret Visser, *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery and Meaning in an Ordinary Church* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2000).

¹³ Kong, *Conserving the Past*, 200.

World War Two, and the post-colonial period of independence, with the subsequent massive economic and physical development of Singapore into a world city. This is, however, not a thesis about urban planning, although it requires an engagement with the literature on cities, particularly as Singapore is a city-state. Rather, the scope of the thesis – and of Singapore Studies more generally – necessitates an interdisciplinary approach. I therefore draw on a broad range of scholarship, including history, social geography, religion, urban studies, heritage conservation, and museum studies.

A physical examination of the buildings and their usage can also tell part of this story and is why I have undertaken site visits to get a sense of place and scale and current usage. This is particularly important in Singapore where change in the physical landscape is ongoing. These site visits were complemented by a visit to the CHIJ Museum to examine how the institutional history is remembered and presented. I also use textual analysis as a key methodology, allowing me to read the historical and the contemporary in the site. My focus on the history of the Convent draws on a range of sources, including (to a limited extent) seven notebooks of handwritten diaries (in French) from the nuns at the Convent, covering the period 1851 to 1971.¹⁴ I also analyse personal narratives, using biographies and contemporary media reports, as well as the visual record, using historical and contemporary photographs.

I have structured the thesis so that it begins with a broad review of the relevant literature and then proceeds chronologically – a chronological approach supports the large time span covered in the thesis. I begin with the ‘founding’ of Singapore in 1819 by the British East India Company and the early years of establishing the thriving port and settlement, then follow this with the establishment of the Convent and its early years. This framing of the historical development of both the port and the Convent is important in itself, but also establishes the context for later developments. I then move on to the major historical shifts of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore during World War Two, and the subsequent decolonisation with the rapid economic and urban development imperatives of the new nation. This led to the government acquisition of the Convent site in the 1980s and the consequent

¹⁴ Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, *Annals de Singapour*, 7 vols. (Unpublished, 1851-1971). Handwritten in French. Microfilm copies are held in the National Archives of Singapore but are not made available for researchers to access. This restricted my ability to use them to excerpts published elsewhere and to notes taken from a copy held by Father Nicolas of the Missions Étrangères de Paris, Singapore.

tender process for its commercial development which I examine in detail. The two final chapters show how the past is remembered in Singapore through decisions made about designation of National Monuments and historical sites, and, finally, how the Convent itself is remembered.

This overall structure is connected to my argument as it is necessary, first, to understand how colonialism shaped the economy, landscape and racial makeup of Singapore in order to understand how the legacy of colonialism remains evident today. Decolonisation was largely negotiated peacefully but the angst about Singapore's expulsion from the Federation of Malaysia and sudden independence has also shaped the political and national narrative. The entrenchment of the People's Action Party (PAP) with its privileging of economic development has shaped post-colonial Singapore and thus urban development policies. It is through this framework that I show and highlight the interwoven histories of Singapore and the Convent.

Chapter One, 'Literature review: A tiny modernity', describes and evaluates the related literature on empire, and the British Empire in particular, to show that Singapore's rapid development as a port-city and colony, with a population made up largely of immigrants, caused it to develop quite differently, even uniquely, from most other colonies. Cultural theorists Ien Ang and John Stratton capture this unique character well in their description of Singapore as 'both non-Western and always-already Westernized'.¹⁵ This early western modernity was also evident in the work of the early Christian missionaries, including the Catholic nuns of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. A more nuanced and complex picture of the role of missionaries in empire has emerged in the scholarly literature over the past decade or so, although there remains limited study of the impact of Catholic nuns as missionaries, and particularly so in British (and hence Protestant) colonies. My research contributes to filling this gap. Decolonisation also occurred somewhat differently in Singapore, occurring relatively peacefully as Singapore joined with British Malaya to form the new nation of Malaysia. The 'moment of anguish' is remembered not as the split from Britain, but as the expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia and the sudden need to forge a way

¹⁵ Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 10, no. 1 (1995): 68.

as an independent nation on its own.¹⁶ The field of Singapore Studies today continues to draw out the implications of this, particularly the entrenchment of the political hegemony of the PAP and its policies of continued economic and urban development, initially at the expense of heritage conservation.

Chapter Two, 'Joining the empire', details the early development of Singapore from 1819 until the arrival of the Sisters in 1854. The British East India Company's acquisition of Singapore as a 'free port' shaped the development of the colony, defining it as a port-city oriented around trade and attracting a racially diverse mix of immigrants. Enlightenment ideas of progress guided an ordering of both the landscape and society, with Raffles's Town Plan bringing an ordering to the streets and districts which also defined and consolidated the racial categorisation that remains in place today. I then explore the beginnings of Christian missionary activity in this early period to show that the British East India Company's *laissez-faire* approach to trade extended to a tolerance of religious missions, including Catholicism.

In Chapter Three, 'The colonial Convent 1854–1942', I trace the establishment of the Convent and its girls' school, orphanage and women's refuge to show that as the British were bringing 'order' to the colonial landscape and its population, the nuns were also ordering society. The school educated young European and Eurasian girls, and later Chinese girls, ordering their daily lives and attempting to inculcate the students with a Western understanding of 'modernity'. The orphanage and the women's refuge were also interventions trying to bring order to an 'unruly' society. The large numbers of children abandoned at the Convent gate over the years reflects the social conditions, child rescue activities and attitudes of the times. The Convent gained financial and general support from a broad range of influential groups, demonstrating both that the nuns were women of influence, and that interactions and co-operation between different groups occurred more often than some analysts of colonialism have acknowledged. Nonetheless, issues of gender, race and class intersected in the Convent to reveal an institution that both reinforced and challenged colonial norms. I end the chapter at the Fall of Singapore in 1942 because the Japanese Occupation disrupted and changed Singaporean society and was a moment of rupture for the Convent as well.

¹⁶ Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998).

Chapter Four, 'The Japanese Occupation and independence: Worlds turned upside down', details the adaptation and survival of the Convent during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore during World War Two. The Convent in Victoria Street managed to continue to operate in some form throughout the Occupation, although with difficulty and a very changed routine. In a sense, their ordering of society was now in the service of a new empire – the Japanese – although not willingly or enthusiastically. I argue that the exodus of many of the Sisters and orphans to the ill-fated farming settlement of Bahau highlights the vulnerability of food supplies in an island that relied on its port for food. I also show that the war brought disenchantment with the British, so that independence came to be seen as possible. Education policies after Independence changed to reflect an increased emphasis on the skills needed in the new nation, and the Convent adapted too, playing its part in the ordering of this new society. I then examine how the period of the Japanese Occupation is remembered today and argue that it is used for nation-building, being portrayed as a defining moment of collective suffering and hardship.

In Chapter Five, 'The city renewed: No less than the gradual demolition of virtually all of the whole', I explore the sense of urgency and crisis in the newly independent nation and the eventual compulsory acquisition of the Convent site for urban redevelopment. I examine the post-colonial period of rapid economic and housing development to show that Singapore was changing physically and socially, and the hegemony of the PAP government was becoming entrenched. This pragmatic developmentalism was another form of 'modernity' and, at least initially, 'progress' was regarded as far more crucial to the survival of the new nation than the preservation of the past. The colonial centre changed as the population moved to the new suburbs, and ultimately schools such as CHIJ moved with them as the city was reconceptualised and remade. Some Convent buildings were demolished to make way for a headquarters for the newly built underground train system (MRT), an indication that the government was modifying the colonial city in the service of its new post-colonial goals. Consistent with a policy of adaptive re-use, the remaining Convent buildings and site were put out to commercial tender.

In Chapter Six, 'The tender document and process: Renewing an old masterpiece', I undertake a close reading of the tender document issued by the Urban Redevelopment

Authority (URA) to potential developers. This document has not been studied before and I use it to shed new light on the way the reuse of the heritage buildings of the Convent – and hence the future Singapore – was being conceptualised in a globalised ‘modern’ city space. I argue that it represented the new nation taking charge of its own physical space and configuring the colonial space anew. The richly-coloured artist impressions portrayed both an imagined future for the site and an imagined past. I also examine the mixed reactions to the development.

In Chapter Seven, ‘Remembering the past: Choices’, I examine the government’s interest in heritage conservation that began in the 1980s as concerns grew about the loss of buildings and a downturn in tourism. I examine the currently gazetted National Monuments (which include two buildings on the Convent site) and designated heritage sites to show how Singapore is conceptualising and commemorating its past. I show how the colonial past is officially recognised and valued as a foundational part of the nation’s history. I also examine how the loss of a number of significant landmarks has led to a sense of dislocation for many Singaporeans and to nostalgia for the past.

In the final chapter, ‘Remembering the Convent’, I detail how the Convent is remembered today in both institutional history and at the site. I use the concept of the palimpsest to explore the changes to the site. The word has traditionally referred to a manuscript or tablet on which later writing has been superimposed over effaced earlier writing but with traces of the old writing possibly remaining. Applying this concept to the CHIJMES site, I argue that some layers of the original use of the site remain, although new uses are continuously overlaid. I start with the CHIJ Museum established in 2012 in the CHIJ Secondary School in Toa Payoh to show that it functions as a preserver of the official cultural memory of the CHIJ community, combining both a religious and community history. I then look briefly at the ‘Those Old Catholic School Days’ walking tour, which was part of Monument Open House 2012, and at the 2012 exhibition ‘Quill’ and the associated book commemorating the 350th anniversary of CHIJ schools worldwide. Finally, I look at the CHIJMES site itself to see what traces of the Convent’s past remain there. I argue that the memory of past use of the site came to the forefront in the widespread community opposition to a planned ‘Chapel Party’ scheduled to be held in the CHIJMES chapel on Easter Saturday 2012. In a Singapore that is

constantly changing, I also revisit the site to report on the changes that have taken place just over the duration of writing this thesis.

The thesis is very much about place and time, about the people who moved through the particular place of the Convent site over these decades, and of how Singapore has changed along that journey. It is also about what we choose to remember. In thinking about these issues, I am reminded of the eloquent phrasing of historian Greg Denning in his essay 'Performing on the Beaches of the Mind'.¹⁷ He suggested that positionality is crucial: am I on the beach looking out at the boats, or on the boats looking at the beach? If Singapore is the beach, I, as an Australian, am not on the beach. If Catholicism is the beach, as a non-Catholic, I am not on the beach. Yet, as a social worker who has worked in Southeast Asia, the orphans of the Convent are on the beaches of my mind. They, and the nuns who cared for them, can perhaps still speak to us. Perhaps the buildings can tell the story of Singapore too.

¹⁷ Greg Denning, "Performing on the Beaches of the Mind: An Essay," *History and Theory* 41, no. 1 (2002).

Chapter One

Literature review: A tiny modernity

Introduction

On 29 October 2014, the Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) posted a video on its Facebook page, which it said ‘captures the essence of the city-state’. The same video was re-posted on the Facebook page of the Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong. The evocative four and a half-minute video titled ‘A Tiny Modernity (Singapore Timelapse 2014)’ was made by a member of the public, Marklin Ang, and showed scenes of Singapore from dawn to late evening, with an accompanying soundtrack. It included a range of time-lapsed scenes of high-rise buildings, freeways and well-known sights, and alternated these with more serene images of water and a solitary tree.

In Ang’s description accompanying the video, he wrote:

Singapore is a rather small country. In fact, it is just a insignificant tiny red dot on the map. Despite this, Singapore has four major races living harmoniously in this tiny city-state, and is a well-developed country. Having just celebrated its 49th birthday, Singapore has come a long way and developed drastically. Tall skyscrapers, high-rise buildings, and everything modern can be found in this “Lion City”. Despite its modernity, Singapore has preserved its cultures and heartlands accordingly, resulting in a healthy blend of nostalgia and anticipation.¹

How we read and make sense of the video and the accompanying text as a cultural artefact, provides us with a frame for understanding the study of Singapore more broadly. By analysing the text, I want to draw out some of the key preoccupations of citizens, the state and scholars to show that these issues of size, survival, racial harmony, modernity, heritage and nostalgia all matter to Singaporeans today. They also matter to the Singaporean government and to Singapore scholars – and to my thesis. This is the physical, historical, political and cultural space in which the Convent and CHIJMES are located.

¹ Marklin Ang, “A Tiny Modernity (Singapore Timelapse 2014)”, www.vimeo.com/109097527, accessed 30 October 2014.

The text starts in a linear fashion. The mention of Singapore's small size – 'rather small', 'insignificant', 'tiny' – recalls the anxiety about Singapore's ability to survive as an independent country after its expulsion from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965, a motif that the PAP used at the time and later to rally community support for its policies. It is also described as 'a tiny red dot', a reference to the infamous description by former Indonesian President B. J. Habibie in 1998, which was interpreted by Singaporeans as a slight, but which they subsequently embraced with pride to show how they have survived and prospered despite their small size.² The text also reflects the government narrative that potential racial tensions of earlier pre- and post-independence days have been resolved, so that now there are 'four major races living harmoniously', thus acknowledging the success of the government's multiracialism policy. Ang goes on to say that Singapore has 'come a long way and developed drastically' and now 'everything modern' can be found there. This is the developmental, progress-focused success story celebrated, the embodiment of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's narrative of the government having moved the nation 'from Third World to First'.³

The description optimistically concludes that despite its modernity, Singapore has 'preserved its cultures and heartlands' and there is now a 'healthy blend of nostalgia and anticipation'. Here we see demonstrated one of the fundamental challenges for Singapore – how to be both a 'global' city-state, while at the same time conserving its built heritage and its less tangible blend of living cultures that distinguishes it from other nations. One Singaporean posted a comment on Ang's video which said that he would have liked to have seen more 'heartland' scenes like the one of shoppers at a covered wet market, suggesting that the 'healthy blend of nostalgia and anticipation' that Ang believes has been achieved is not necessarily felt by all citizens, and the tension between developmentalism, nostalgia and heritage continues to be played out today.

² "Singapore strains relations with Indonesia's President", *Wall Street Journal*, 4 August 1998. Also "Learning and Living the Singapore Story: Keynote address by Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, at the Network Conference 2003", Singapore Government Press Release, 3 May 2003. The little red dot also forms the basis for the logo for the Sg50 celebrations in 2015 of 50 years as a Republic, 'signifying that our dreams are not limited by the physical size of our island nation'. See www.singapore50.sg/SG50/About, accessed 23 June 2015.

³ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965 - 2000* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000).

I have used 'A tiny modernity' as the title for this chapter because it encapsulates some of these key issues. Singapore is indisputably 'tiny', although its small physical size was compensated for, historically and today, by its geographical position on the searoutes between India and China. After independence, its small size led to doubts about whether it could survive as a separate nation-state, an anxiety manifested in the discourse of Singapore exceptionalism and utilised by the PAP government to bind citizens to the new nation and to the party. 'Modernity' references the developmentalism of Singapore's early post-colonial years and the rush to 'modernise', as well as capturing the achievement of a small city-state in surpassing the economies of many larger countries. Its economic success today is admired by many other nations seeking to emulate this economic transformation into a hyper-modern global metropolis. Yet, as I explore later, if we conceptualise modernity as a discourse rather than a concept tied to a particular epoch, then there are also previous periods of 'modernity' in the pre-colonial and colonial eras.⁴

This, then, is the context for my thesis on the Convent. I examine how the Convent developed and how it helped to develop Singapore, as well as how the development of Singapore changed and challenged the Convent. In the review of the literature, I start in the colonial period with empire and the 'founding' of Singapore and suggest that this was a different kind of 'tiny modernity', in that it was to some extent driven by Enlightenment ideas of progress and order. I move on to consider the role of missionaries in empire and, in particular, women in missions and as nuns. I then move to a consideration of post-colonial Singapore and the issues of political hegemony and how the history of the nation is presented. Lastly, I examine issues of heritage conservation. I do this to read the scholarly literature in concert with Singapore.

Empire

Historian Nicholas Tarling's *Southeast Asia: A Modern History* rightly starts with the ethnic diversity of the region, then the kingdoms and super-kingdoms created before the fifteenth century, and only then moving on to the empires of the European powers from the sixteenth century.⁵ This is a reminder that there were kingdoms and empires *before* the emergence of

⁴ Barbara Andaya, "Historicising 'Modernity' in Southeast Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40, no. 4 (1997).

⁵ Nicholas Tarling, *Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001).

the European trading empires. Recent archaeological evidence has emerged of Singapore's importance from the fourteenth century as a flourishing and multi-ethnic trading centre, then known as Temasik, along what has been called the maritime Silk Road.⁶ The same evidence has shown that it had declined substantially in size and importance by 1800, with only a small settlement around the river mouth. As archaeologist John Miskic pointed out, while most people believe that Singapore's history began with the arrival of Stamford Raffles in 1819, ironically, Raffles himself was under no such illusion. His studies of ancient Malay texts had convinced him that he was reviving an ancient and significant seaport.⁷ Nonetheless, Singapore's history, and hence my thesis, is fundamentally shaped by its colonial status and needs to be understood within the larger context of nineteenth-century European imperialism.

By the nineteenth century, Britain, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and France all had colonies in Southeast Asia, either directly or through the monopoly trading companies which acted as 'the unofficial agents of European colonial expansion'.⁸ Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm called this 'the Age of Empire' and conceptualised this search for markets as the outcome of the nineteenth-century creation of a single capitalist global economy that was progressively reaching into the remote corners of the world.⁹ He argued that empire was not just an economic and political phenomenon, but also cultural; it encouraged the masses in the metropole to identify themselves with the imperial state and nation, and so to unconsciously endow it with justification and legitimacy.¹⁰

Literary theorist Edward Said similarly argued that empire 'allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples *should* be subjugated, and ...(to) think of the *imperium* as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced people'.¹¹ That is, empire is fundamentally about power and inequality. Frantz Fanon's powerful 1965 Marxist critique of colonisation, *The Wretched of the Earth*, argued that colonisation is inherently violent, and its subjects exploited and dehumanised in a world 'cut in two', with 'the policeman and the soldier' as

⁶ John Miskic, *Singapore & the Silk Road of the Sea 1300-1800* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013).

⁷ Miskic, *Singapore & the Silk Road of the Sea*, 2.

⁸ Stephen Bown, *Merchant Kings: When Companies Ruled the World 1600-1900* (London: Conway, 2010), 1.

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 62.

¹⁰ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 70.

¹¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 10.

‘the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression’.¹² Fanon was referring to colonialism generally, but I am concerned here with the British Empire, as Singapore was initially a British East India Company trading post and subsequently a British colony.

There has been a wealth of literature written about the British Empire, which at its height dominated about a third of the world, culturally and economically.¹³ Its legacy and, indeed, its inherent morality are still debated and contested. Historian Ashley Jackson summarised the argument that it was, at heart, about imperialist economic expansion. In what he called ‘the crude logic of the burgeoning workshop of the world’, people in the colonies produced raw materials, which were turned into manufactured goods in British mills, and then sold back to the colonies, in ‘a perfect symmetry’.¹⁴ Singapore did not produce materials per se, but rather acted as an entrepôt port through which these colonial materials and products passed, a port described by historian Constance Turnbull as ‘the Clapham Junction of the Eastern Seas’.¹⁵ In this sense it differed from other colonies: it was a port-city where almost everyone was an immigrant; it had a *laissez-faire* approach to business; its traders from other races were often wealthy and influential; and it also served as a stop-over or holiday destination for British travellers. It was not a ‘workshop of the world’ but rather an ‘emporium of the world’. Raffles himself referred to it as such, writing that the object of the port ‘is not territory but trade: a great commercial emporium’.¹⁶

At the other end of the spectrum of debate, historian Niall Ferguson has controversially put the case *for* the British Empire, arguing that it conferred long-lasting benefits.¹⁷ He has been accused of attempting to rehabilitate empire, and of doing ‘little more than peddling the familiar myths of progress and ... the notion that the West is the standard bearer for a particular kind of capitalist modernity’.¹⁸ That is, Ferguson has been criticised for adopting a Whig view of history, a teleological assumption of the inevitable progress of mankind. As we

¹² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Macgibbon and Fee, 1965), 31.

¹³ Catherine Hall, ed. *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 9.

¹⁴ Ashley Jackson, *Mad Dogs and Englishmen: A Grand Tour of the British Empire at its Height 1850-1945* (London: Quercus, 2009), 44.

¹⁵ C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819 - 2005*, 3rd ed. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 137.

¹⁶ Thomas Stamford Raffles to Colonel Addenbrooke, quoted in Sophia Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Service of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), [1830]; 380.

¹⁷ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003). See also Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London & New York: Allen Lane, 2011).

¹⁸ Toby Jones, "The Laureate of Empire," *Raritan* 32, no. 2 (2012): 80-81.

will see, this ‘capitalist modernity’, while relevant to Singapore, needs to be moderated to reflect the economic realities of a free-port and a non-producing economy. As historian James Warren has shown in his ‘people’s histories’ of the rickshaw drivers, prostitutes and other labourers in colonial Singapore, the lives of ordinary workers were often miserable and short, seemingly without sharing in the benefits of empire.¹⁹

I am not intending to enter the debate on the benefits or otherwise of empire. I am, however, interested in the concept of modernity, as I flagged in the initial examination of the ‘Tiny Modernity’ video. Post-colonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that the European colonisers of the nineteenth century brought with them concepts about democracy, citizenship, the state and human rights that had their genesis in an Enlightenment humanism, that were preached at the colonised while at the same time denied in practice.²⁰ Progress and development were regarded as inherently linear and inevitable, which led to ideas of historicism, with modernity based on a Stagist view of history in which it is ‘first in Europe, then elsewhere’. Colonies in this context would one day be ready for independence, but ‘not yet’. Instead, they are confined to an ‘imaginary waiting room of history’, where they wait to be considered sufficiently ‘modern’.²¹

To counter this, Chakrabarty advocated a de-centering or ‘provincialising’ of Europe, so that it is moved from being always at the centre of our thinking, giving space for other ways of being. Marxist historian Arif Dirlik criticised post-colonial scholars such as Chakrabarty, arguing that their concepts of ‘alternative modernities’ shifted criticism from capitalism to colonialism, and its subject from political economy to culture.²² For Dirlik, ‘what is at issue is modernity, with all its complex constituents, of which Eurocentrism was the formative moment’.²³ That is, there is only a ‘global modernity’ possessing a Euro-American core.²⁴

¹⁹ See for example James Warren, *Pirates, Prostitutes and Pullers : Explorations in the Ethno- and Social History of Southeast Asia* (Crawley, W.A.: UWA Press, 2008). For a similar examination of trishaw drivers, see Jason Lim, *A Slow Ride into the Past: The Chinese Trishaw Industry in Singapore, 1942-1983* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2013).

²⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2003), 4.

²¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 8.

²² Arif Dirlik, "Thinking Modernity Historically: Is "Alternative Modernity" the Answer?," *Asian Review of World Histories* 1, no. 1 January (2013): 19.

²³ Arif Dirlik, "Is There History after Eurocentrism?: Globalism, Postcolonialism, and the Disavowal of History," *Cultural Critique*, no. 42 Spring (1999): 1.

²⁴ Arif Dirlik, "Global Modernity?: Modernity in an Age of Global Capitalism," *European Journal of Social Theory* 6, no. 3 (2003).

Historian Barbara Andaya critiqued such a conflation of ‘modernity’ and ‘Western’.²⁵ She noted that if we broaden our understanding of modernity in Southeast Asia so that it is not restricted to recent history, Southeast Asian societies generally accorded great importance to being up to date; knowledge of the outside world was not restricted to an ‘age of discovery’, but rather came about by an active and ongoing involvement in international trade. Andaya argued that this ‘eclectic’ modernity was undermined by ‘modern’ ideas coming increasingly from Europe and associated with Europe’s political and economic control – in other words, a ‘European appropriation of modernity’.²⁶

Singapore both challenges and reinforces this critique of modernity. To return to the trope of the ‘tiny modernity’, we can see that there were continual iterations of ‘modernity’ over time. As an entrepôt port, it fits with Andaya’s notion of a modernity related to involvement in international trade. Yet as a British colony, a European appropriation of modernity inevitably occurred, evidenced, for example, by the wealthy Baba (Peranakan) Chinese merchants, who spoke English and Malay. They were valued for their familiarity with European ways and manners, and so acted as go-betweens between the British and the various ethnic groups.²⁷ But modernity has also been a preoccupation for the state in the post-independence era.

Cultural theorists Ien Ang and Jon Stratton offered an alternative paradigm for Singapore in an article, ‘The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures’, which, while written twenty years ago, still echoes in Singapore Studies.²⁸ They described Singapore as ‘a contradiction in terms’: it cannot lay claim to a myth of indigenous origin or to a history of anti-colonial struggle for independence; instead its ‘very existence as a modern administrative unit is a thoroughly Western occasion, originating in British colonialism’.²⁹ Drawing on feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty’s seminal concept of ‘always, already’, Ang

²⁵ Andaya, "Historicising "Modernity" in Southeast Asia."

²⁶ Andaya, "Historicising Modernity": 405.

²⁷ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*: 72. See also Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen, *The Straits Chinese House: Domestic Life and Traditions* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore & Editions Didier Millet, 2006).

²⁸ Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 10, no. 1 (1995).

²⁹ Ang and Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism": 68.

and Stratton persuasively argued that Singapore's history has led to a country that is 'both non-Western and always-already Westernized'.³⁰

In Chakrabarty's sense then, it becomes impossible for Singapore to provincialise Europe because Singapore is 'always, already Westernized'. Ang and Stratton frame this as an irresolvable dilemma for Singapore: it owes its very existence to the West and thus its 'Asianness' can never be defined externally to the West.³¹ Instead, Singapore is a 'thoroughly hybrid construct', neither in the West, nor properly in the Asia constructed by the West. In my thesis, which examines a European institution, a French Convent, I cannot provincialise Europe, but I can tell a more complicated story and one that is aware of the implication of how histories are framed.

Said famously proposed that the West, since the late eighteenth century, has constructed a view of the Orient as the binary opposite of the West – the Orient as passive, feminine, unchanging and the 'Other'.³² He proposed that this Orientalism was 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient', and that the West 'depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand'.³³ Ang and Stratton drew on these ideas but developed them to argue that the growing economic power of the Asian 'dragons', such as Japan and Singapore, led to a shift in geo-cultural relations and a transformation of the parameters of the discourse of 'the West versus the Rest'.³⁴ In this scenario, the 'Rest' are now talking back and using this new 'Asian' identity as 'a stage for critiquing, othering, and finally, reconstituting the "West"'.³⁵

Yet here again, despite attempts to cast itself as 'Asia's ideological champion' by questioning Western morality and promoting 'Asian values', Singapore has been hampered by its history:

³⁰Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader* ed. Les Back and John Soloms (London: Routledge, 2000). Ang and Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism": 67.

³¹Ang and Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism": 71.

³²Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Reprinted with new preface ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

³³Said, *Orientalism*, 3 and 7.

³⁴Ang and Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism": 65.

³⁵Ang and Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism": 68. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*, 2nd ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

Singaporean modernity, so Ang and Stratton have argued, being ‘generally derided and dismissed as inauthentic, synthetic, derivative.’³⁶ Indeed they asserted that

It is impossible for Singapore to erase its derivative and artificial existence as a Western colonial construct – more than any other nation in the region, Western colonialism is inscribed in Singapore’s very ontology, and in the very composition of its predominantly immigrant population.³⁷

This dilemma recalls post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry, with its ambivalence of ‘almost the same, but not quite’.³⁸ My chapters dealing with issues of nation-building and globalisation examine this ambivalent desire to be accepted as a ‘modern’ globalised city. This push for ‘modernity’ has been a preoccupation for citizens and scholars alike.

Historian Benedict Anderson theorised that a nation is not a natural entity, but rather ‘an imagined political community’, a social construct, imagined as inherently limited and sovereign.³⁹ Anderson went on, inadvertently, to demonstrate the centrality of European thought by arguing that anti-colonial struggles depended on European models of the nation-state, since they were now ‘everywhere modularly imagined’.⁴⁰ Historian Partha Chatterjee challenged Anderson’s argument that anti-colonial nationalist struggles are a ‘derivative discourse’. He asked:

If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined communities from certain ‘modular’ forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonised.⁴¹

³⁶ Ang and Stratton, “The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism”: 70.

³⁷ Ang and Stratton, “The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism”: 74.

³⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Anne Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 153.

³⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁴⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 113. Note that in a later edition, Anderson accepted the validity of criticism of his Euro-centrism and wrote two additional chapters to correct this.

⁴¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Chatterjee and Anderson were referring to nations as imagined communities, but I suggest that we can also stretch this concept to apply to religious ideas – the imagined communities of faith, the nation of Heaven, the world of the after-life. Christian missionaries were involved in the spread of their own European views of appropriate religious ideas – understood by them as a civilising and modernising mission, an ‘evangelical modernity’.⁴² This ‘evangelical modernity’ was at play in Singapore and in the Convent activities.

Missionaries

This discussion of imagined communities raises the issue of whether the imaginations of Christian converts were ‘forever colonised’, and returns us to Fanon’s concept of the ‘colonisation of the mind’ – the adoption of the forms of thought of the coloniser.⁴³ For Fanon, this included Christianity, with ‘the white people’s Church, the foreigner’s Church’, calling the native not to God’s way ‘but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor’.⁴⁴ This Marxist analysis is perhaps unsurprisingly at odds with that of theologian Brian Stanley, who noted that scholars ‘still baulk at the unpalatable conclusion’ that conversions might have occurred because Christianity was found to be ‘intrinsically attractive’.⁴⁵ Perhaps there was a complexity *between* these two positions of coercion and genuine religious conversion, which acknowledges that, despite their colonised status, individuals were not entirely without personal agency.

They participated in Christian services for a range of reasons, including practical considerations such as access to food, education and influence. As I show in Chapter Three, girls (other than the orphans) were sent to the fee-paying Convent school to be educated, to increase their chances of a career or, more likely, a good marriage, or perhaps to move in the ‘right’ social circles. While schools might be generally part of what philosopher Michel Foucault called the ‘disciplinary society’, the parents of the Convent students *chose* to send their children to a school which carried at least some measure of prestige.⁴⁶ This may well be described as ‘colonial mimicry’, yet it is also an act of agency.

⁴² Ussama Makdisi, "Reclaiming the Land of the Bible: Missionaries, Secularism and Evangelical Modernity," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 3 (1997).

⁴³ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 39.

⁴⁴ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 34.

⁴⁵ Brian Stanley, "Conversion to Christianity: The Colonization of the Mind?," *International Review of Missions* XCII, no. 366 (2003): 318.

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977).

The portrayal of missionaries as willing agents of empire, or at least complicit in empire, has been prevalent in the colonial discourse for some time, with critics portraying missionaries as responsible for an insensitive ‘cultural imperialism’.⁴⁷ Said argued that the ‘daily imposition of power in the dynamics of everyday life’ was more important in empire than direct force, since a unified discourse developed ‘based on a distinction between the Westerner and the native so integral and adaptable as to make change almost impossible’.⁴⁸

In this vein, anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff asserted that language became colonised, as everyday vernacular terms were appropriated, classified and changed by missionaries, becoming ‘metonyms of an embracing process of “conversion”: the process of making difference into similarity, of reducing the lower order diversities of the non-European world to the universalist categories of the West’.⁴⁹ Missionaries are envisaged by literary scholar Anna Johnston as having sought to ‘consolidate their precarious position in colonial cultures by mimicking stereotypical imperial practices ... and by rigidly enforcing and encouraging colonial versions of them in their “heathen” charges’.⁵⁰ Johnston was studying Protestant missionaries, and I suggest the situation of the CHIJ Convent in Singapore is less straightforward, being both French in a British colony and also the home and workplace of nuns, a distinction to which I return later.

Increasingly, scholars, such as historians Andrew Porter and Norman Etherington, have astutely argued that the missionary association with empire was not as clear-cut as previously thought.⁵¹ Etherington acknowledged that missions and the official apparatus of empire played related roles ‘in a larger drama – the spread of modernization, globalization, and Western cultural hegemony’.⁵² He also, though, made a persuasive case for how remarkable the two subsidiary branches of mission work – education and medicine – were, and noted that

⁴⁷ Andrew Porter, "'Cultural Imperialism" and Protestant Missionary Enterprise 1780-1914," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 25, no. 3 (1997): 367.

⁴⁸ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*: 128 and 31-32.

⁴⁹ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 221.

⁵⁰ Anne Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

⁵¹ See for example Andrew Porter, *Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missions and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). Also Norman Etherington, ed. *Missions and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵² Etherington, *Missions and Empire*, 3-4 and 261.

missionaries figure prominently as pioneers of modern welfare states and international philanthropy. We can see this dual role of evangelism and welfare provision in the Convent: while the CHIJ nuns were certainly involved in the task of ‘saving souls’, they were also firmly engaged in assisting women and children in need and in the development of education for girls. Education for girls operated and contributed at the personal level for the student as well as at the broader societal level.

Mission schools did crucial work in the empire-building process. Foucault recognised the role of educational institutions in disciplining society and in maintaining systems of social power.⁵³ They produce cultural products, which operate to support and justify the colonial situation.⁵⁴ Academic focus has tended to be on the larger-scale aspects of empire, rather than the ‘intimate and small-scale nature’ of empiric colonial work.⁵⁵ Educationalists Helen May, Baljit Kaur and Larry Prochner, in their recent study of nineteenth-century Protestant mission schools in India, Canada and New Zealand, position their work as ‘revealing another facet of the engagement between missionaries and Indigenous peoples’ which ‘includes the minutiae of everyday places and personalities that mirror the “larger drama” of colonization for both peoples’.⁵⁶ My study is not exclusively on the schools run at the Convent, but it contributes to the somewhat limited research in this area.

Gender and missionaries

Just as there has been a growing development of a more nuanced understanding of the missionary role, so there has been a growing interest in the role of women in empire. Until the 1980s and 1990s, histories of empire virtually ignored European women; historian Margaret Strobel argued that if they *were* mentioned, they were blamed for the rift between the European administrator and those he governed.⁵⁷ Their role as ‘memsahibs’ in the Indian Raj has now been studied extensively, although often to demonstrate the inhibiting social

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Routledge, 1972). Also Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

⁵⁴ See for example Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

⁵⁵ Sarah de Leeuw and Margo Greenwood, "Foreword. History Lessons: What *Empire, Education, and Indigenous Childhoods* Teaches Us," in *Empire, Education, and Indigenous Childhoods: Nineteenth-Century Missionary Infant Schools in Three British Colonies*, ed. Helen May, Baljit Kaur, and Larry Prochner (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), xviii.

⁵⁶ Helen May, Baljit Kaur, and Larry Prochner, *Empire, Education, and Indigenous Childhoods: Nineteenth-Century Missionary Infant Schools in Three British Colonies* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 7.

⁵⁷ Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1.

rituals of colonial societies.⁵⁸ Historian Cecilia Leong-Salobir examined the gendered role of the memsahibs in the home, suggesting that British expatriate food tastes and habits developed from their reliance on indigenous cooks, who played an active role in determining the colonists' food choices.⁵⁹ Significant contributions have also now been made by other academics, particularly in the areas of how the empire was perceived 'at home', and the intersections of race, gender and empire.

Anthropologist Ann Stoler has examined what she has called 'the sexual interface of the colonial encounter', arguing that sexual access and domestic arrangements were central to colonial power structures.⁶⁰ This required regulating the sexual, conjugal and domestic life of both European colonists and the colonised due to fears of sexual contamination, racial degeneracy and the desire to maintain white prestige. Historian Catherine Hall has been interested in how the empire was perceived 'at home' and how it influenced everyday life in the metropole; although this view has been challenged by historian Bernard Porter, who maintained that most Britons were either ignorant of empire or indifferent to it.⁶¹ Nonetheless, historian Susan Thorne noted that religious missions played an important role in bringing the empire *home*, since their fundraising efforts disseminated information about colonised peoples and encouraged reflection of the empire's *raison d'être*.⁶²

Feminist scholar Anne McClintock has contended that race, gender and class come into existence *in and through* relation to each other and that imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western industrial modernity.⁶³ So white women 'were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting'.⁶⁴ In the discussion of gender, race and class here, I want to draw attention to McClintock's analysis of the situation of Irish

⁵⁸ See for example Anne de Courcy, *The Fishing Fleet: Husband-Hunting in the Raj* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2012).

⁵⁹ Cecilia Leong-Salobir, *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A Taste of Empire* (London: Routledge, 2011).

⁶⁰ Ann Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 635. Also Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁶¹ Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶² Susan Thorne, "Religion and Empire at Home," in *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 146.

⁶³ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

⁶⁴ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 6.

women, since some of the Infant Jesus nuns in Singapore were Irish. McClintock noted that racial classifications from the mid-eighteenth century labelled the Irish as ‘white negroes’, that is, as a simianised and degenerate race, and, in a belief system where women, generally, were regarded as having smaller brains than men, Irish women lagged even lower in the depths of the white race.⁶⁵ There is no specific evidence to show that nuns who were Irish suffered discrimination directly. Rather, I suggest that their status as nuns – an issue I return to later – transcended their status as Irish.

Just as the role of women in the British Empire has come to be re-examined, the role of female missionaries has also begun to be explored in a different way. Once absent from mission histories, or portrayed solely as accompanying spouses, they are now being acknowledged as active contributors to mission in their work in establishing contacts with local women, translating texts and running schools and hospitals.⁶⁶ Much of this interest, however, has been in women in Protestant missions. Catholic women have been a lesser focus of study, and I propose that there are two main reasons for this. Historian Ulrike Strasser has asserted that such an omission has sprung from more than simple gender bias. Instead, the mainstream narrative of state-building has been Weberian and Protestant, so that nuns are ‘viewed through the lens of profoundly Protestant understandings of sexuality and hence can only symbolize the premodern past’.⁶⁷ In this scenario, it ‘treats bodies as always already sexualized and therefore relegates religious virgins to a premodern time’.⁶⁸ It perhaps also reflects the ambiguous status of nuns: historian Elizabeth Kuhns has described the nun as seeming ‘both less than female but greater than human’.⁶⁹ In the process, they tended to be invisible, or as Strasser termed it, there has been a ‘historiographical banishment of nuns’.⁷⁰

The other reason for the seeming omission of Catholic women in discourses on empire is, I suggest, because of the association of the British Empire with the Church of England. The British monarch is the head of the Church of England – the Defender of the Faith – and the

⁶⁵ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 52-56.

⁶⁶ See for example Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock, "Women and Cultural Exchanges," in *Missions and Empire*, ed. Norman Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Also Kwok Pui-Lan, "The Image of the 'White Lady': Gender and Race in Christian Mission," in *The Special Nature of Women*, ed. Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (London & Philadelphia: SCM Press; Trinity Press International, 1991/6).

⁶⁷ Ulrike Strasser, "Early Modern Nuns and the Feminist Politics of Religion," *Journal of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2004): 531.

⁶⁸ Strasser, "Early Modern Nuns": 537.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Kuhns, *The Habit: A History of the Clothing of Catholic Nuns* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 8.

⁷⁰ Strasser, "Early Modern Nuns": 530.

historic enmity between Protestants and Catholics in Britain was longstanding. As well, Catholic missionaries were predominantly French – in 1878, three-quarters of male and female Catholic missionaries were French.⁷¹ At the same time, in the French colonies, Catholic missionaries generally ‘have regularly been relegated to, at most, a few pages in studies of modern French colonialism’, perhaps because of the historical anti-clericism of French republican governments.⁷² This is beginning to change, and Etherington, for example, has written a useful comparison of the missionary experience in the British and French empires, while historian Tara Alberts has written about Catholicism in Southeast Asia in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.⁷³

Catholic nuns as missionaries in the French empire have received even more limited attention, although historian Sarah Curtis has made a significant contribution to this scholarship.⁷⁴ Historian Susan O’Brien has written about French nuns in nineteenth-century Britain, describing them as ‘missing missionaries’, and asking ‘where are the Catholic Sisters in British missiology?’⁷⁵ She suggested that one of the reasons is that there has been ‘a lack of match between the identity of a “sister” with the identity of a “missionary”’. She persuasively argued that:

Nineteenth century nuns have so consistently been perceived as simply providing what others wanted – elementary schools, domestic help in seminaries, support of the church’s welfare organizations – that they have less often been described as agents in their own right: as the missionaries, property owners, liturgists, educational policy makers and spiritual directors that many of them undoubtedly were.⁷⁶

As I show in Chapter Three, the nuns of the CHIJ in Singapore were women actively engaged in the establishment and operation of the Convent. They were missionaries in the sense that

⁷¹ Sarah Curtis, *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.

⁷² Owen White and J.P. Daughton, eds., *In God's Empire: French Missionaries and the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5. I am constrained here by not being able to read French language works myself.

⁷³ Norman Etherington, "Afterword: The Missionary Experience in British and French Empires," in *In God's Empire: French Missionaries and the Modern World*, ed. Owen White and J.P. Daughton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Tara Alberts, *Conflicts and Conversions: Catholicism in Southeast Asia, 1500-1700* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2012).

⁷⁴ Curtis, *Civilizing Habits*. Also Sarah Curtis, *Educating the Faithful: Religion, Society and Schooling in Nineteenth Century France* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000).

⁷⁵ Susan O'Brien, "Missing Missionaries: Where are the Catholic Sisters in British Missiology?," in *4th History of Women in Britain and Ireland Conference* (Cambridge University 2005).

⁷⁶ Susan O'Brien, "French Nuns in Nineteenth Century England," *Past and Present* 154(1997): 180.

their vocation was educating girls and caring for orphans and women – in the process of which, of course, they would also ‘save souls’.

Even less attention has been paid to Catholic nuns operating in British colonies. Church historian W. Southerwood’s study of Catholics in British colonies is geographically extensive but has minimal information on the work of Catholic nuns.⁷⁷ Some other studies have been undertaken on particular religious Orders, but generally this is an underdeveloped area of research.⁷⁸ Similarly, on the whole, studies of Catholicism in colonial Singapore have focused much more on the work of the priests of the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), the Paris Foreign Missions Society.⁷⁹ Honours student Alexandre Yeoh has written specifically about the anomaly of a French Catholic mission in the Anglican colony of Singapore, although again this refers only relatively incidentally to the work of the nuns.⁸⁰ My study contributes to filling this gap. It is important that we develop a more nuanced picture of empire and of missionaries, since, as Johnston has said, ‘colonial missionary activities do not constitute a singular evangelical project as opposed to other colonial projects, but *different kinds* of evangelical, colonial projects in each location they occurred’.⁸¹ The dynamics around a private school run by French nuns with British, Eurasian and, later, Chinese students are quite different from many other colonies. Researching the contribution of French Catholic nuns in colonial Singapore enriches the field of missionary studies and also the historiography of Singapore itself.

There have been two key books written by alumni of the CHIJ schools in Victoria Street. *Convent Chronicles: History of a pioneer mission school for girls in Singapore* by Lily Kong, Low Soon Ai and Jacqueline Yip has been invaluable, as has *Convent of the Holy Infant*

⁷⁷ W.T. Southerwood, *Catholics in British Colonies: Planting a Faith where No Sun Sets - Islands and Dependencies of Britain till 1900* (London: Minerva Press, 1998).

⁷⁸ See for example Josephine Brady, "Sisters of St Joseph: The Tasmanian Experience. The Foundation of the Sisters of St Joseph in Tasmania 1887-1937" (unpublished PhD dissertation, Australian Catholic University, 2004).

⁷⁹ See for example Eugene Wijesigha and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth: The Catholic Church in Singapore 1819-2004* (Singapore: Commissioned and Published by His Most Rev. Nicolas Chia, Titular Roman Catholic Archbishop of Singapore, 2006). Also Clement Liew, "The Roman Catholic Church of Singapore 1819-1910: From Mission to Church" (National University of Singapore, 1993).

⁸⁰ Alexandre Paul Yeoh, "The Anomaly of a French Catholic Mission Station Within a British Anglican Colony in Nineteenth Century Singapore, 1832-1888" (Honours, National University of Singapore, 2010/11).

⁸¹ Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire*, 31.

Jesus: 150 years in Singapore by Elaine Meyers.⁸² For Singapore Studies, historiography has emerged as a complication, constrained at times by a state-sponsored official history and also by the relatively small size of the nation and the reluctance of scholars and others to be critical of government.⁸³ These two excellent books should be considered within those constraints, with the additional issues of being written by alumni and, in Meyers' case, published by the Infant Jesus Sisters. They operate, therefore, as institutional histories. I build on, and expand, the understanding of the Convent by moving beyond institutional histories written by the institution, to place it more broadly within the social fabric of the development of Singapore itself. I examine the site in colonial Singapore but also examine its significance and survival post-Independence.

Contemporary Christians

In Singapore today, as in the colonial period, Christianity occupies an ambivalent position.⁸⁴ Literature scholar Robbie Goh has argued that it is seen as an outsider compared to the 'Asian' religions of Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism, yet its alignment with European modernity makes it desirable and fashionable, especially among young people with Anglophone educations.⁸⁵ While there is generally a strong correlation between race, language and religion in Singapore, Christianity tends to be strongly correlated with more expensive private housing, university education, and English spoken at home, with Chinese Christians forming a distinct grouping among the Chinese, exhibiting 'elite modernizing qualities'.⁸⁶

There is, however, at the same time an underlying anxiety about the domination of Christians in positions of authority, such as in medicine and teaching, and uneasiness about Christians who evangelise too aggressively. Goh suggested that this ambiguity highlights the uneasy

⁸² Lily Kong, Low Soon Ai, and Jacqueline Yip *Convent Chronicles: History of a Pioneer Mission School for Girls in Singapore* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1994). Elaine Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus: 150 Years in Singapore* (Penang: The Lady Superior of Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, 2004).

⁸³ Michael Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore: Networks of Power and Influence* (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 5.

⁸⁴ Robbie Goh, "Christian Identities in Singapore: Religion, Race and Culture between state controls and transnational flows," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 26, no. 1 (2009). See also Robbie Goh, "The Mission School in Singapore: Colonialism, Moral Training, Pedagogy, and the Creation of Modernity," in *Asian Migrants and Education: The Tensions of Education in Immigrant Societies and Among Migrant Groups* ed. Michael Charney, Brenda Yeoh, and Chee Kiong Tong (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003).

⁸⁵ Goh, "Christian Identities in Singapore": 10.

⁸⁶ Goh, "Christian Identities in Singapore": 3.

distinction between ‘cosmopolitan’ Singaporeans (economically savvy, with international capability but also tempted to leave for greener pastures) and ‘heartland’ Singaporeans (who lack the Anglophone competence, education and talent, but reinforce ‘core values’ and ‘social stability’ by their very stolidity and immobility).⁸⁷ In this sense, the position of Christians can be seen as a temporal progression of the colonial mission that created an elite who were educated in English, could get employment and status in the colonial government and who were perceived as more ‘modernised’, and who contrast with the wider population of colonial subjects.

Singaporeans are regularly reminded by the government of the dangers associated with religion creeping into the public domain. These ‘constructed narratives’ often refer back to the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950 and the riots of 1964, both involving Muslims, and the 1987 ‘Marxist conspiracy’ when Christian social activists were detained.⁸⁸ They serve the purpose of emphasising the potential for religion to generate disorder and violence, which only the state can hold at bay by legal constraints.⁸⁹ In Chapter Eight, I examine the controversy over a dance party planned to be held in the CHIJMES chapel during Easter 2012 and which was perceived as offensive to Catholics. The community outrage, referral to the police for charges of sedition and the eventual cancellation of the party, highlight the sensitivities of government and the community to any offence to a religious faith. That is, religious harmony is conflated with racial harmony. It demonstrates how government policies are deeply embedded in the national psyche as I explore further below.

Writing ‘The Singapore Story’

Scholars of Singapore have justifiably been occupied by the formation of the nation-state and the development of a fledgling national history. The moment of ‘colonisation’ is uncontested and the details of Raffles’s arrival in 1819 and the negotiation of a treaty, without a show of

⁸⁷ Goh, “Christian Identities in Singapore”: 11. See also Terence Chong, “Filling the Moral Void: The Christian Right in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 41, no. 4 (2011): 568-69.

⁸⁸ Lily Rahim, “Governing Muslims in Singapore’s Secular Authoritarian State,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 66, no. 2 (2012): 175. Maria Hertogh was a Dutch Eurasian girl who lost contact with her parents when they were interned during the Japanese Occupation and was brought up by a Muslim family. A custody battle ensued after the war, with a judge ruling that she should be sent back to the Netherlands. Note that the riots of 1964 were not specifically religious but rather reflected the heightened racial tensions of the times.

⁸⁹ Jothie Rajah, “Policing Religion: Discursive excursions into Singapore’s Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act,” in *Examining Practice, Interrogating Theory: Comparative Legal Studies in Asia*, ed. Penelope Nicholson and Sarah Biddulph (Leiden and Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers - Brill, 2008), 275.

force or a shot fired, are well known. The entrepôt role of the new British East India Company settlement meant that almost all residents were immigrants, so much so that sociologist Chua Beng Huat has written that in the colonial period, 'Singaporean' as a political category did not exist: an inhabitant was either an alien or a British subject. Even the local born inhabitants 'had anchored their cultural orientation to imaginary homelands, transmitted at homes and in schools financed by the respective vernacular groups'.⁹⁰ This makes the discussion of colonialism in Singapore different from that of most British colonies, since there is no history of violent invasion and oppression of indigenous groups. While there was still a power differential between the colonisers and the 'colonised', all groups were drawn to the settlement by its free-trade policies and the potential to make money, with some Chinese merchants, in particular, becoming extremely wealthy. Hence the concept of Singapore as 'always-already Westernised'.

Unlike other ex-colonies, the nation's angst has revolved, not around the moment of colonisation or even decolonisation, but around the moment of sudden independence as a republic. Decolonisation came about largely by negotiation with the British authorities, with limited self-government implemented in 1959, followed by an agreed merging of British Malaya and Singapore to form the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. Yet, two years later Singapore was abruptly expelled, in what has been famously described as a 'moment of anguish'.⁹¹ Literary scholar Philip Holden has pointed to Singapore's unique history as a colonial creation that only reluctantly became an autonomous state, leaving it without a pre-colonial past or a revolutionary anti-colonial struggle upon which to base the imagined community of a modern nation.⁹² This raises a fundamental dilemma – just when was the nation born? Was it at the time of the coming of the British? During the Japanese Occupation? At the time of federation as part of Malaysia? Or at the time of independence being thrust upon it? How should the nation's history be told? And who controls the telling?

Historian Marc Ferro, coming out of the French *Annales* tradition, argued that, generally, in nations it is the institutional history that dominates since it is the dominant powers – such as

⁹⁰ Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), 102.

⁹¹ Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998).

⁹² Philip Holden, "The Free Market's Second Coming; Monumentalising Raffles," in *Reading Culture: Textual Practices in Singapore*, ed. Phyllis Chew and Anneliese Kramer-Dahl (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1999), 86.

states, churches, political parties and private interests that own or finance the media or means of production – that have influence in a society. They understand that history can do ideological work, since ‘to control the past is to master the present, to legitimize dominion and justify legal claims’.⁹³ Literary theorist Homi Bhabha argued that histories ‘narrate the nation’, that is, history and nation-building are integral to each other, so much so that historian Prasenjit Duara has called for the necessity of ‘rescuing history from the nation’.⁹⁴ Duara argued that national histories have traditionally depicted the nation in a linear way as a ‘self-same ancient entity evolving into the collective subject of the modern nation-state’.⁹⁵ Instead, history is a series of multiple, often conflicting narratives, produced simultaneously at national, local and transnational levels. For Duara, histories need to represent this complexity so as to resist being pressed into the service of the nation; that is, to resist reiterating and reinforcing national mythologies and ideologies. This is a particularly relevant issue for Singapore, given the entrenchment and hegemony of the PAP. As we might expect in a new nation, history-making has been a source of both contention and political interest.

Historians Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang noted that, in Singapore, the study of history was avoided after independence and considered best forgotten, since it was feared that emphasising the different and divided ancestries and loyalties of the population might stir up racial tensions.⁹⁶ Instead – and here Ang and Stratton’s argument that Singapore was ‘always, already Westernized’ is exemplified – Stamford Raffles was a safe and uncontroversial choice for designation as the founder of Singapore.

There have been some recent attempts to champion the value of looking at Singapore’s history from the subaltern viewpoint, most notably by Warren who, with his study of rickshaw coolies, advocated for what he calls a ‘people’s history’.⁹⁷ As Hong has noted, in

⁹³ Marc Ferro, *The Use and Abuse of History: Or How the Past is Taught to Children* (London: Routledge, 2003). See also James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 1.

⁹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, ed. *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990). Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁹⁵ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 229.

⁹⁶ Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and its Pasts* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008). See also Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), 3.

⁹⁷ James Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore 1880-1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003). For a general perspective on Subaltern Studies, see Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern

Singapore there has been a tradition of the 'Great Man' approach to history, and of biography *as* history, and this continues today.⁹⁸ If Raffles was the Great Man of colonial Singapore, so Lee Kuan Yew has become the modern equivalent. In constructing his autobiography, Lee plotted the linear history of Singapore, 'out of which ... emerge the authentic Singaporean spirit and its embodiment in both himself and the younger generation of talent whom he has tested'.⁹⁹ Thus his struggle during Singapore's Malaysian phase 'affords Singapore its claim to a heroic birth, the counterpart to the revolutionary anti-colonialism of Burma or Indonesia.'¹⁰⁰ Hong argued that Lee sees himself as not just the 'Father of the Nation' and thus responsible for the state, but as the very *essence* of the nation – the Lee Kuan Yew story *becomes* Singapore's history, and vice versa.¹⁰¹

This version of history was introduced as the officially sanctioned history to be taught in all schools in 1977, with its title of 'The Singapore Story' identical to that of one of Lee's memoirs.¹⁰² Historian Loh Kah Seng has argued that the government engaged in a 'tactical selection of facts' which highlighted those that supported the party line, and where major historical episodes were carefully re-evaluated to emphasise particular values.¹⁰³ Its use in schools is particularly significant, since as Bhabha has argued, the history that is taught in schools 'narrates the nation', and as Ferro has noted, it 'marks us for life'.¹⁰⁴ Lee's memoirs continue to sell well: the publication in 2011 of interviews with Lee as *Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* (and the fact that three months after its initial publication, it was already in its fifth impression) is testimony to his continued influence and stature – and to the acceptance of his version of history.¹⁰⁵

Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

⁹⁸ Lysa Hong, "The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 3 (2002).

⁹⁹ Hong, "The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History," 555.

¹⁰⁰ Hong, "The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History," 555.

¹⁰¹ Hong, "The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History," 546. See also Philip Holden, "A Man and an Island: Gender and Nation in Lee Kuan Yew's The Singapore Story," *Biography* 24, no. 2 (2001).

¹⁰² Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998).

¹⁰³ Loh Kah Seng, "Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (1998): 6-7. See also Michael Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁴ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*. Ferro, *The use and abuse of history*: ix.

¹⁰⁵ Han Fook Kwang et al., *Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2011).

Historian Nicole Tarulevicz has argued that Lee's autobiographies and political biographies have become a template for how history is narrated and understood in Singapore.¹⁰⁶ That is, history is linear and involves a moving forward to conquer obstacles and build the nation. She suggested that the story of Ah Koon, the founder of the successful Ya Kun Kaya Toast coffee shop chain, is told in the same fashion – from poor immigrant to wealthy businessman –and that the Singaporean audience is receptive to the brand because of the familiarity of the narrative structure.¹⁰⁷

In a similar way, I suggest that Father Beurel performs the 'Great Man' function in the history of the Convent. That is, in the institutional history he is identified as the person who almost singlehandedly worked to bring the De La Salle Brothers and the Infant Jesus Sisters to Singapore to establish schools. There is a linear progression to the story, a determined overcoming of obstacles, culminating in the successful establishment of the schools, which have been foundational to the development of education in the nation. In Chapter Eight, I examine the CHIJ museum, which tells the institutional history of the Convent in this linear and familiar narrative style.

Sociologist Terence Chong has argued that the history of post-colonial Singapore more broadly is often narrated as a linear success story. It begins with the expulsion from Malaysia, the fear of national survival, followed by a Herculean effort to overcome obstacles, and then the achievement of success through hard work, pragmatic policies and good leadership.¹⁰⁸ This 'obstacle-triumph binary', Chong argued, is usually narrated in two ways, sometimes simultaneously: firstly in terms of economic success and secondly as ideological success.¹⁰⁹

In 2014, the government introduced a new history textbook for secondary schools, *Singapore: The Making of a Nation-State, 1300-1975*. The story is still linear but, significantly, draws on the evidence uncovered by archaeologist John Miksic of the pre-colonial thriving maritime hub of Temasik.¹¹⁰ This move was prompted by the extensive archaeological evidence

¹⁰⁶ Nicole Tarulevicz, "History Making in Singapore: Who is Producing the Knowledge?," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009).

¹⁰⁷ Nicole Tarulevicz, *Eating Her Curries and Kway: A Cultural History of Food in Singapore* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2014), 36-37.

¹⁰⁸ Terence Chong, ed. *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2010), 1.

¹⁰⁹ Chong, *Management of Success*, 2.

¹¹⁰ John Miksic, *Singapore & the Silk Road of the Sea 1300-1800* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013).

uncovered, but is also part of a repositioning of history and the nation. The response of Singaporean academics has been supportive, explicitly acknowledging the use of history in the service of nation-building. Historian Derek Heng, referencing the government's fear of communal conflict in the 1960s and 1970s, believes that the acknowledgement now of a longer history reflects a greater confidence 'to say we were once a Malay polity cutting straight down through Asia'.¹¹¹ He also suggested 'there's a need to develop a collective social memory. It's become a political issue', citing the opposition in the community to the 2011 announcement of plans for a motorway through Bukit Brown cemetery.¹¹² In this way, Heng suggests, Singaporeans 'will feel more rooted' if they feel part of a longer regional legacy. Historian Kwa Chong Guan stated that while it used to suit Singapore to see itself as a city-state with a British heritage, 'modern Singapore needs a different interpretation of history to reinforce a more global perspective'. Such a perspective will help Singaporeans to 'accept the population explosion and become more inclusive'.¹¹³

Significantly, the same newspaper report quoted another Singaporean historian, Quek Ser Hwee, commenting that these days students would not ask her if she feared arrest for discussing heterodox views, and that opinions expressed on the university's departmental blog are wide-ranging. Surprisingly explicit, however, about the hegemony of the PAP government, she also noted that opinions 'stop short of breaching the "out of bounds" limits that were once rigorously policed by colonial and post-colonial administrations', since 'it's part of our DNA to know them'.¹¹⁴ This suggests there is a measure of self-censorship of opinions that in turn reinforces government control.

The entrenchment of the PAP as Singapore's government from independence to the present has dominated the study of Singapore.¹¹⁵ Much of the discourse among scholars has been about the continued hegemony of the state through its policies of multiracialism, education, language and meritocracy and through its domination of the 'official version' of history. I

¹¹¹ Jane Peterson, "In New Textbook, the Story of Singapore Begins 500 Years Earlier." *New York Times*, 11 May 2014.

¹¹² Huang Jianli, "Resurgent Spirits of Civil Society Activism: Rediscovering the Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 87, no. 2 (2014).

¹¹³ *New York Times*, 11 May 2014.

¹¹⁴ *New York Times*, 11 May 2014. See also Chris Hudson, *Beyond the Singapore Girl: Discourses of Gender and Nation in Singapore* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2013), 34. Cheong Yip Seng, *OB Markers: My Straits Times Story* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2013).

¹¹⁵ See for example Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore*. Also Chris Lydgate, *Lee's Law: How Singapore Crushes Dissent* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2003).

have chosen to examine these issues in detail because they are both central to my thesis which is, at its most fundamental, about the transformations in Singapore from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day, and to the field of Singapore Studies in which I locate my scholarship. These issues of the hegemony of the state came into play when the pressures for continued economic growth led the government to take over the Convent site for urban redevelopment. Its ability to do so, and the relative lack of social protest, testify to the power of the state and the nature of its priorities. It also reflects the official view of ‘history’ and ‘heritage’, wherein history is yoked to the service of the nation. I start with these issues of history-telling, move on to the entrenched hegemony of the PAP and conclude this section by teasing out the tensions between development and heritage conservation.

Scholars, and the PAP itself, attribute the economic success story to the government’s tight control of society – its ‘soft authoritarianism’ – so that economic growth and affluence legitimise the ruling party and underpin one-party dominance.¹¹⁶ In other words, Singaporeans have accepted government controls as part of the process of building the nation and as the acceptable price of economic development.¹¹⁷ The entrenchment of the political ruling elite, centred on the Lee family, has, historian Michael Barr argued, led to the regime and the nation being regarded as conceptually almost inseparable.¹¹⁸ Barr argued that the reality of power in the hands of a small elite is ‘disguised by a carefully cultivated cover of regime and social legitimation based upon the twin myths that Singapore is a meritocratic and multiracial society’.¹¹⁹ He concluded that:

Rarely has the Singapore system of governance been seriously called a democracy except by apologists, but neither is it usually called simply a dictatorship except by its more enthusiastic detractors. It is a complex system, full of internal contradictions and inconsistencies ...¹²⁰

I return to this issue of government hegemony later as it is central to issues of heritage conservation in general and the redevelopment of the Convent in particular.

¹¹⁶ See for example Henri Ghesquiere, *Singapore's Success: Engineering Economic Growth* (Singapore: Thomson, 2007). Also Carl Trocki, *Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control* (London: Routledge, 2006).

¹¹⁷ See for example Cherian George, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control 1990-2000* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2000).

¹¹⁸ Barr and Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore*, 268.

¹¹⁹ Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore*, 8.

¹²⁰ Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore*, 6.

Chong noted that the majority of Singaporeans continue to be comfortable with the PAP's consolidation of power. Those who are not are either not sufficiently disgruntled to produce a sustained protest, or grudgingly accept it as a trade-off for the efficiency of daily life in Singapore.¹²¹ Realistically, for the individual, being politically oppositional can be perilous, and so the tendency is to avoid offending the political regime.¹²² Political scientist James Gomez described this reluctance to criticise the government as a constant form of self-censorship and censorship of others.¹²³ This has been called 'the paradox of Singapore', since it runs against conventional liberal democratic political theory that an affluent society with a large middle class is the most conducive environment for the emergence of a liberal democratic polity.¹²⁴

Nonetheless, Chong speculated that younger Singaporeans will require more since, unlike their parents, many of those born after 1965 have come to know Singapore only as a developed country and a global city.¹²⁵ They do not have the same emotional ties as their parents with the 'struggle' for nationhood and are less likely to respond to an overly authoritarian or patriarchal government style. Similarly, legal scholar Eugene Tan has argued that the social compact between the PAP and the people has moved on from the simple exchange of economic growth for political compliance and towards a more complex relationship.¹²⁶ This more complex relationship between citizens and government is playing out in relation to heritage conservation. Issues of nostalgia, heritage conservation and the reuse of sites have now become more apparent and contested in the globalised Singapore of today. This is occurring in tandem with, or even perhaps *because* of, the relentless drive for economic development and the tremendous economic transformation of Singapore since independence.

¹²¹ Chong, *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, 596.

¹²² Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, 207.

¹²³ James Gomez, *Self-Censorship: Singapore's Shame* (Singapore: THINK Centre, 2000).

¹²⁴ Lam Peng Er and Kevin Y. L. Tan, *Lee's Lieutenants: Singapore's Old Guard* (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999). Also Lydgate, *How Singapore Crushes Dissent*. Also Russell Heng, "Give me Liberty or Give me Wealth," in *Debating Singapore: Reflective Essays*, ed. Derek de Cunha (Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994).

¹²⁵ Chong, *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, 599.

¹²⁶ Eugene Tan, "The Evolving Social Compact and the Transformation of Singapore," in *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2010).

Heritage conservation

Heritage conservation is tied to issues of place and attachment to place. For sociologist Henri Lefebvre, place is a particular form of socially produced space that is created through acts of naming, as well as by the distinctive activities and imaginings associated with the social space.¹²⁷ Other scholars such as geographer Edward Soja have built on Lefebvre's work to argue that place is defined by, and constructed by, the lived experiences of people and is fundamental to a sense of belonging and identity.¹²⁸ In this way, places have a 'depth' which goes beyond the physical, containing layers of meaning built up from different biographies and histories.¹²⁹ I am drawn to geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's concept that place is created and maintained through the 'fields of care' that result from people's emotional attachment.¹³⁰ This attachment, often surfacing as nostalgia, means that heritage conservation is often a contested issue, since what constitutes heritage is open to differing interpretations.

By objectifying heritage in buildings, we make 'an apparently immutable history present in the *now* of society'.¹³¹ So when historical buildings or sites are preserved or gazetted in some way, they are always a tale of several eras: they tell the story of the actual event or person; they reflect the attitudes and times of those who erected the monument or plaque; and, in addition, the viewer interprets and 'sees' history through the values and experiences of their own present.¹³² Yet, as geographers Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong have argued, monuments and historic districts only represent history in partial ways, since they ossify particular versions of collective memory and, at the same time, erase other versions of the past.¹³³ In other words, the power to decide which structures are conserved also confers the ability to decide *which* history, or *whose* history, is preserved. In Chapter Seven I analyse the

¹²⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. N. Donaldson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1991).

¹²⁸ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989). See also Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

¹²⁹ Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, "The Notion of Place in the Construction of History, Nostalgia and Heritage," in *Our Place in Time: Exploring Heritage and Memory in Singapore*, ed. Kian Woon Kwok, et al. (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 1999), 55.

¹³⁰ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977). See also Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974).

¹³¹ Michael Crang, "On the Heritage Trail: Maps and Journeys to olde Englande," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12(1994): 341.

¹³² Loewen, *Lies across America*, 36.

¹³³ Yeoh and Kong, "The Notion of Place": 61.

designation of National Monuments and heritage sites in Singapore for what their selection tells us about how Singapore has chosen to remember its past.

Nations emerging from colonialism have to decide how far to divest the landscape of colonial structures, and to what extent to accept the colonial legacy as part of the newly independent state.¹³⁴ For Singapore, the early years after Independence were dominated by a focus on economic development, and hence conservation of the built environment was not a consideration or priority – a stance common to developing nations where change is equated with progress and modernisation.¹³⁵ By the 1970s and 1980s, however, the government's growing concern about the Westernisation of Singaporean society led to heritage conservation being seen as a way of helping youth to better balance Asian values and western influences.¹³⁶ There was concern too that tourist numbers were declining because of a perceived 'lack of colour in the increasingly antiseptic city-state' and the loss of 'Oriental mystique and charm'.¹³⁷ Heritage conservation was re-prioritised, although it remained constrained by developmentalism. In Chapters Five and Six, I examine how the Convent was caught up in this tension. That is, in Lee's transformation of Singapore from 'third world to first', the Convent was similarly transformed from its colonial past to a first-world, globalised entertainment venue.

Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong have argued that in Singapore today, heritage has important social, economic and political purposes for the state; it represents the nation's cultural wealth and diversity, serves to bind Singaporeans together, and promotes Singapore abroad as an exotic tourist destination.¹³⁸ They suggested that to do this, heritage has been objectified either in museums or in showcase historical streets and districts, 'where signage and other markers help signify historicity'. Earlier, I argued that the colonial legacy is still apparent in Singapore, and we can see this reflected in conservation policies.

¹³⁴ Martin Perry, Lily Kong, and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State* (Chichester: Wiley, 1997), 277.

¹³⁵ Yeoh and Kong, "The Notion of Place".

¹³⁶ Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 254.

¹³⁷ Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 256.

¹³⁸ Yeoh and Kong, "The Notion of Place": 60.

Goh drew attention to the ‘psychological landscape of the colonial city’ implicit in Raffles’s Town Plan of 1822 with its ‘European town’ and ‘native town’.¹³⁹ He suggested that the chief areas of the old European town have become ‘the hallmark cultural zone of the modern city’, where neoclassical edifices are ‘generally afforded a kind of reverence which recognizes the commercial value of grand architectural style and civil-religious history’. These ‘cultural remainders’ are ‘simultaneously invoked and repudiated, elevated for their “historical” and “social” importance while neutered of their specific political-cultural signification’.¹⁴⁰ The three major museums in Singapore (the National Museum, the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Singapore Art Museum) are each located in grand colonial buildings, their very facades signifying the inclusion of the colonial story into Singapore’s national narrative. In Chapter Eight, where I examine the CHIJ Museum in reflecting how the Convent is remembered today, I also examine the role of museums more generally as spaces that are not neutral but are culturally constructed, articulate knowledge and power in a society, and are often used for nationalist purposes.¹⁴¹

Goh also noted that in the Civic District, ‘neoclassical architecture and colonial-mission history are packaged as accessories to an attractive “premier” lifestyle featuring the visual and performing arts, fine dining, black-tie corporate events, and private events of the upper classes’.¹⁴² The Civic District includes the Raffles Hotel which has been renovated, extended and declared a National Monument. In a similar vein, historian Marizio Peleggi, writing about the ‘monumentalisation’ of historic hotels in Southeast Asia, argued that a ‘semblance of historical authenticity’ has been bestowed on them by their renovation, and that this is then ‘consumed’ as nostalgia by tourists and others.¹⁴³ Goh included in this the Convent/CHIJMES complex and the Singapore Art Museum (formerly the St Joseph’s Institution), touching on one of the central issues of my thesis in relation to the redevelopment of the Convent site. In Chapter Six I examine the tender document and its articulation of possibilities for transformation of the site into just such a ‘premier’ lifestyle

¹³⁹ Robbie Goh, “Evangelical Economics and Abjected Spaces: Cultural Territorialisation in Singapore,” in *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity*, ed. Ryan Bishop, John Phillips, and Wei-Wei Yeo (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁴⁰ Robbie Goh, “Evangelical Economics and Abjected Spaces”: 102.

¹⁴¹ See for example Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995). Also Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁴² Goh, “Evangelical Economics and Abjected Spaces”: 102.

¹⁴³ Maurizio Peleggi, “Consuming colonial nostalgia: The monumentalisation of historic hotels in urban South-East Asia,” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 46, no. 3 (2005).

venue, and in Chapter Eight I look at the ongoing changes to the site to update its appeal as an up-market venue.

Goh also argued that the areas of the former 'native town', in contrast, are often the subject of more radical rebuilding, with vernacular building forms replaced with modernist high-rise buildings and a more plebeian character.¹⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the 'theming' of the heritage sites of the 'native town' – China Town, Little India and Kampong Glam – has featured heavily in tourism promotion, being used to differentiate Singapore from other destinations and promote itself as interesting and exotic, the antithesis of the bland, globalised city. There has been criticism, however, that this touristic 'theming' has led to a sanitised and artificial environment and a lack of the 'authenticity' that many tourists want to experience.

Geographer T. C. Chang argued that prescribing themes to places leads to a 'taming' of place – planners inadvertently freeze the identities of the places and stultify their potential to evolve organically.¹⁴⁵ When 'theme overrides context', places become signifiers of themes, rather than living embodiments of their own. This recalls the work of sociologist John Urry who examined the 'consumption of tourism' and argued that contemporary tourists are 'collectors of gazes', with tourist sites increasingly signposted with markers that identify what things and places are worthy of our gaze.¹⁴⁶ Tourists seek the 'authentic', but this is ultimately unsuccessful because those being gazed upon come to construct artificial sites, making for a 'staged authenticity'.¹⁴⁷ This is the 'fickle promise of authenticity' and 'the discomfort of a manufactured spectacularity' described in a different context by performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson.¹⁴⁸ The CHIJMES complex, however, is a destination not only for tourists, but also for Singaporeans, for whom it is marketed as a blend of the historical and the modern upmarket. 'Authenticity' is perhaps less important if what one is seeking is a fun night out and good food and drink in cutting-edge bars and restaurants. These intersecting issues of conservation, theming, authenticity and usage are all played out in the conservation and current usage of the Convent site, which I examine particularly in Chapters Six and Eight.

¹⁴⁴ Goh, "Evangelical Economics and Abjected Spaces": 102.

¹⁴⁵ T. C. Chang, "Theming cities, Taming places: Insights from Singapore," *Geografiska Annaler, Series B, Human Geography* 82, no. 1 (2000).

¹⁴⁶ John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995). Also John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1990).

¹⁴⁷ Urry, *Consuming Places*, 140.

¹⁴⁸ Shannon Jackson, *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity* (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 2000).

The debate about the relationship of heritage conservation and economic development is an ongoing one in many countries. It is particularly pertinent in Singapore, a nation which political scientist Michael Barr and sociologist Zlatko Skrbis have described as being in ‘perpetual constructionist mode’ – the government is continuously fixated on tangible acts of material construction of buildings, roads and land reclamation because their control is predicated on the idea that everything in Singapore works and functions.¹⁴⁹ The national narrative is one of progress and improvement, and the hegemony of the government is far-reaching and opposition muted. Yeoh and Kong argued that where there have been efforts by lobby groups to protect heritage buildings, they have failed, because ‘ordinary’ people do not have the power to ‘define’ places in the same way that the state does – the powerful have control over the making of place, and so the definition of the past has remained in their hands.¹⁵⁰

Kong asserted that people have either adapted, albeit often grudgingly, to the idea of loss or have resisted ineffectually, so that what appears to be an uncommon relative harmony is in effect a veneer that conceals tensions and dissatisfactions.¹⁵¹ This was perhaps the case with the Convent when opposition to the reuse was muted and ineffective and, in a broader sense, with the inability to protect other significant buildings from demolition, such as the National Library building.¹⁵² Recent (2011 onwards) community advocacy for preservation of the Bukit Brown Cemetery suggests there is an increased interest in heritage conservation and a willingness to publicly lobby the government on these issues, but it is unclear at the moment how sustained or successful this will be.¹⁵³

Preservation, as Kong has noted, does not ensure that the *meanings* invested in these places remain the same; rather, places are appropriated and their meanings are re-defined by the

¹⁴⁹ Barr and Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore*, 11.

¹⁵⁰ Yeoh and Kong, “The Notion of Place”: 146.

¹⁵¹ Lily Kong, "Negotiating Conceptions of 'Sacred Space': A Case Study of Religious Buildings in Singapore," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18, no. 3 (1993): 356.

¹⁵² For an account of the National Library debate, see Kwok Kian Woon, Ho Weng Hin, and Tan Kar Lin, *Between Forgetting and Remembering: Memories and the National Library* (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000).

¹⁵³ See for example Melody Zaccheus, “What future for our Past?”, *Straits Times*, 21 June 2014. Also Huang Jianli, "Resurgent Spirits of Civil Society Activism: Rediscovering the Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore."

National Monuments (now Heritage) Board and the tourist authority.¹⁵⁴ In defence of change however, Edward Hollis wrote with irony that ‘in the discourse of architecture, all buildings, in order to remain beautiful, must not change; and all buildings, in order not to change, must aspire to the funereal condition of the monument’.¹⁵⁵ He argued that all buildings *will* change, and ‘perhaps, also ... they should’, since their beauty has been generated by their long and unpredictable lives.¹⁵⁶ Each alteration then is a ‘retelling’ of the building as it exists at a particular time; the life of the building is both perpetuated and transformed by the repeated act of alteration and reuse. Such buildings have come to be considered as urban palimpsests of meaning and memory.¹⁵⁷ In following the ‘modernising’ of the Convent site over the decades, I want to both peel back and add some layers of meaning to the Singapore story.

Conclusion

In this Chapter I have detailed the scholarship on the British Empire to demonstrate its complexity and the usefulness of a deep, nuanced analysis. English literature scholar Thomas Richards suggested that most British people in the nineteenth century were aware that the empire ‘was something of a collective improvisation’.¹⁵⁸ Colonies were gained and developed in different ways, and this is the case for Singapore. Its population was made up almost entirely of immigrants and its free-port status and geographic location meant that trade was the attraction for merchants of various races. Nonetheless, we can see the complex interactions of class, race and gender. Missionary activity was part of this empire-building, and the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus played a part in the ordering of society. The complexities continue, however, as the missionaries were French, Catholic and female in a predominantly male environment in a British and, hence, Protestant colony. My study thus builds on and contributes to what is a relatively overlooked part of the imperial historiography.

My thesis traces the life of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus at the Victoria Street site from its missionary beginnings and, in so doing, the wider context of the development of

¹⁵⁴ Kong, "Negotiating Conceptions of 'Sacred Space'": 347.

¹⁵⁵ Edward Hollis, *The Secret Lives of Buildings* (London: Portobello Books, 2009).

¹⁵⁶ Hollis, *The Secret Lives of Buildings*, 10-11.

¹⁵⁷ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 3.

Singapore more broadly. 'Place' is important here, and so I have shown that Singapore was colonised and decolonised in ways that have meant that it has embraced its colonial history more than many other ex-colonies. This has implications for its heritage conservation policies. We also need to understand the transformation of the Convent site within the context of the government policies of developmentalism and the political hegemony of the PAP.

Because of the colonial legacy and the interlinking of empire and Christian missionaries, I start in Chapter Two with the British Empire and the founding of Singapore. I follow the colonial ordering of the landscape and society, as well as the early arrivals of Christian missionaries. I argue that in a related, but different, way the early Christian missionaries were also engaged in bringing order and a new 'modernity' to the fledgling colonial outpost.

Chapter Two

Joining the empire

Destination: Singapore 1854 – The Grand Ball

To mark the thirty-five years since the British settlement of Singapore, the Governor, the Hon. Colonel W. J. Butterworth, celebrated the occasion on the 6 February 1854 with a Ball in the Assembly Rooms. It was of sufficient significance and grandeur to be reported at some length in the *Illustrated London News*, with an accompanying illustration showing the ballroom ‘brilliantly illuminated’ and decorated with a marble bust of Sir Stamford Raffles, supported by the British Ensign and the British East India Company flag.¹ In the background, so the article reported, there was also the transparency of Commerce, with the motto ‘In Commerce lies Britain’s Prosperity’. There were two sketches of Singapore in 1819 and 1854, the room was filled with flowers, and the walls were covered with flags of the nations of visiting ships. The Ball opened with a quadrille to the music of a military band. The article noted:

During the dances, the scene was most enchanting. Here was seen a group of guests clad in the contrasted costumes of Europe and the Celestial Empire; there in close apposition, the flowing robes of Arabia and Persia, the magnificent and costly apparel of a Turkish Jew, the rose-ying garments of Siamese chieftains, the uniforms of Consuls and of native officers of the Anglo Indian army and a gaily-dressed Hebrew.²

In the illustration, however (Figure 3 below), the eye is drawn to the British officers in their military uniforms and the ladies with their crinolines, representing British power, pomp and ceremony on display.

¹ “Ball at Singapore”, *Illustrated London News*, 22 April 1854. See also D.J.M. Tate, *Straits Affairs: The Malay World and Singapore: Being Glimpses of the Straits Settlements and the Malay Peninsula in the Nineteenth Century as seen through The Illustrated London News and other contemporary sources* (Hong Kong: John Nicholson Ltd, 1989).

² “Ball at Singapore”.



Figure 3 “Ball at Singapore, in celebration of the anniversary of the settlement”,
Illustrated London News, 22 April 1854.

British attitudes of the time to the Chinese can perhaps be gauged by a report in *Household Words* two years earlier, again of a grand ball, but this one organised by a successful Chinese businessman, Tan Kim Seng – the first ball to be organised in Singapore by a Chinese person. The article’s author wrote:

I had of course about me (as everyone else had) the usual prejudice of my own race, and, therefore, on being presented to the master of the house, with his pig-tail, sharp features and Mongolian eyes, it was with much difficulty that I kept my mirth under polite restraint.³

After proposing a toast to Queen Victoria at the Governor’s 1854 ball, the Governor noted that in the past year 1,058 square-rigged vessels and 2,360 native boats had visited the port. Imports and exports amounted to six and a half million pounds sterling, ‘an advance regular and unprecedented’. He then proposed ‘the Continued Prosperity of Singapore, with Free-Trade in its fullest integrity’. The dancing continued until two o’clock; the next day the children of the Singapore Institution Free Schools and its Ladies Committee gathered on the lawns to be entertained by Mrs Butterworth, and ‘the fragments of the supper were sent to the Lunatic Asylum and Hospitals’.⁴

³ James Augustus St. John, “A Chinaman’s Ball”, *Household Words*, 19 June 1852, 331-2.

⁴ “Ball at Singapore”.

The colony of Singapore had, indeed, grown dramatically in the thirty-five years since the British East India Company's fleet of ships dropped anchor in the harbour for the first time. At that time, little remained of the flourishing port of the fourteenth century, but the small settlement of about a thousand people was appraised by Stamford Raffles and William Farquhar as an ideal trading base for the British East India Company, having adequate drinking water, a natural harbour and located only a few miles from the main sea route to China.⁵ A few days later a treaty was signed between Raffles, the newly installed Sultan Hussein, and Temenggong Abdul Rahman, giving the British East India Company permission to establish a trading post.⁶ It was, however, as tenants in a Malay settlement, with the Malay chiefs exerting judicial powers and sharing in trade revenues. It was not until 1824 that the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance was signed with the Malay chiefs, formally ceding Singapore to the British East India Company.⁷

Singapore's location and establishment as a Free Port allowed British commerce to extend further eastwards towards China and, to a lesser extent, towards the Malay Archipelago. British, Chinese and Bugis traders could do business conveniently: the Bugis traders sought cloth from India and guns; Indian opium was shipped into China to pay for Chinese goods; and the British themselves sought silk, tea and ceramics from China, as well as, later, the produce of the Straits area itself.⁸ Raffles had written that 'our object is not territory but trade; a great commercial emporium and a fulcrum whence we may extend our influence politically as circumstances may hereafter require'.⁹ In 1823, he wrote to a cousin that Singapore 'has already become a great Emporium' and 'a fine field for European speculation', and by 1826 it was already the most flourishing of the Straits Settlements.¹⁰

⁵ C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819 - 2005*. 3rd ed. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009. For an examination of the earlier period, see John Mikić, *Singapore & the Silk Road of the Sea 1300-1800* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013).

⁶ Mark Frost and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography* (Hong Kong and Singapore: Hong Kong University Press and National Museum of Singapore, 2009), 41-45. See page 43 for facsimile of last page of treaty.

⁷ For a full discussion of the negotiations and relationships during the 1819-1825 period, see Carl Trocki, *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore 1784 -1885*. 2nd ed. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), chapter 2.

⁸ Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*: 89.

⁹ Thomas Stamford Raffles to Colonel Addenbrooke, quoted in Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Service of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*: [1830]; 380.

¹⁰ Letter dated 12 January 1823 to the Reverend Doctor Thomas Raffles. Reproduced in Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*, 67.

Over time, the history of the colony's origins became romanticised to suit a view of empire. The initial 1819 'founding' may well have been low-key, as historians Mark Frost and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow have commented:

Looking back at a date in history that marks the foundation of modern Singapore, it's striking how banal the reality seems to have been. Any sense of momentous occasion was buried under legal formalities and curtailed by the desire of Raffles and the British to get things over and done with as quickly as possible.¹¹

Yet this banality stands in contrast to the 1854 ball, which was all about ceremony and the need to impose a sense of grandeur on the event. Later representations further embellished the early years, as can be seen in this lithograph (Figure 4 below) purporting to show the British entering Singapore after the 1824 cession.¹²



Figure 4. "The British entering Singapore after its cession in 1824". Part of the series: 'The British Dominions beyond the seas'. *Illustrated London News*, 11 April 1903.

Published in 1903 as part of a series of 'The British Dominions Beyond the Seas', it depicts Britannia in all her glory, exemplified in the triumphant arrival by elephant and towering over the coolies below. It seems quite unlikely that an elephant was involved in the real event;

¹¹ Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*: 44.

¹² "The British entering Singapore after its cession in 1824". Part of the series "The British Dominions Beyond the Seas". *Illustrated London News*, 11 April 1903: 547.

indeed, the *Hikayat Abdullah* recounted that the Sultan and the Temenggong ‘came up the hill in a carriage’ and after ratifying the agreement, a twelve-gun salute was fired as a token of goodwill and they ‘returned home’.¹³ The elephant, however, occupies an iconographic place in the British domination of India and so became a template for Britons reading images of Empire generally.¹⁴ In the illustration, they see a moment of history-making that becomes, and reinforces, the way the readers of the *Illustrated London News* read Empire. It was inevitably about power and domination.

Ordering the landscape and society

British colonial power was expressed in part through shaping the physical form of its ports and towns.¹⁵ Colonial port-cities were planned and regulated so as to facilitate trade and the management of large numbers of people – and to demonstrate a scientific and ‘civilized’ approach to social order. While Singapore was not at this time a colony per se, instead operating under the *laissez-faire* approach of the British East India Company, the port and the fledgling city had to operate efficiently if business was to prosper. Raffles, returning to Singapore from Bencoolen in 1822, was impressed with the growth in population and trade, but scathing of the way the Resident, William Farquhar, had allowed the town to develop physically. Accordingly, he decided to reorganise the layout of the town and develop a town plan that would facilitate public administration, maximize business interests and inscribe public order on space.¹⁶

Regulations were introduced determining the orientation and width of streets, the size of houses, the requirement for verandas and approved building materials.¹⁷ Areas were designated for government buildings, religious sites and a botanic garden. As in other colonies, there was a policy of racial segregation that would separate Europeans from other races and give them the best land and location in the city. Urban Planner Belinda Yuen has noted, however, that Raffles ‘went beyond the “whites” versus “others” nomenclature that

¹³ Munshi Abdullah, *The Hikayat Abdullah: An Annotated Translation*. Translated by A.H. Hill. Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970), 220-221. Abdullah was scribe/interpreter/teacher to Stamford Raffles.

¹⁴ Ashley Jackson and David Tomkins, *Illustrating Empire: A Visual History of British Imperialism* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, 2011).

¹⁵ See for example Robert Home, *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁶ Martin Perry, Lily Kong, and Brenda Yeoh. *Singapore: A Developmental City State*. Chichester: Wiley, 1997, 26-27.

¹⁷ Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 27-29.

was a standard feature in British colonial town planning elsewhere'.¹⁸ An area was assigned for Europeans, but there were also ethnic functional neighbourhoods designated for the Chinese, Malays, Bugis and Indians, although wealthy merchants were not compelled to live in the areas allocated to their community.¹⁹

Raffles wanted a planned town to help advance trade and government in a practical way, but we can also read this as a physical manifestation of Enlightenment ideals of reason, knowledge and order. Imposing order on the landscape was a signifier of progress, while also making it more familiar. For example, we can understand Raffles's plan for a botanic garden as more than an experimental and ornamental exercise. For the British, it also transformed and tamed the exotic landscape into a more familiar and reassuring terrain. Historian Emma Reisz has argued that it represented 'the reassuring familiarity of imperial rule balanced against a seductive oriental landscape, the imperial set against the local'.²⁰

Raffles's town plan largely set in place the broad structure that still persists today, although in a modified form. This is more than the physical framework of the city. Constance Turnbull has argued that Raffles's encouragement that prosperous Asian and European merchants live and trade side by side, formed the basis of Singapore's multiracial society 'where, from the start, the colour of men's money often counted for more than the colour of their skins.'²¹ The designation of separate ethnic neighbourhoods also has implications for tourism and heritage conservation today and will be further explored in Chapter Seven.

Raffles also attempted to order the social circumstances of the fledgling settlement by measures such as banning the carrying of weapons, closing down cockfighting and gambling dens, and prohibiting slavery.²² The population was growing rapidly, however: by 1824, the total population was already 10,683, and by 1849, just five years prior to Governor

¹⁸ Belinda Yuen, "Urban Planning in Southeast Asia: Perspective from Singapore," *Town Planning Review* 82, no. 2 (2011): 150.

¹⁹ For a detailed examination of Indians in Singapore, see Rajesh Rai, *Indians in Singapore, 1819-1945: Diaspora in the Colonial Port-City* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁰ Emma Reisz, "City as Garden: Shared Space in the Urban Botanic Gardens of Singapore and Malaysia, 1786-2000," in *Postcolonial Urbanism: Southeast Asian Cities and Global Processes*, ed. Ryan Bishop, John Phillips, and Wei-Wei Yeo (New York: Routledge, 2003), 134.

²¹ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 38.

²² Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 40-41.

Butterworth's Grand Ball, it had grown to 52,891.²³ The numbers of Europeans remained very low – in 1849, the Chinese made up 52.9 per cent of the population; Malays 32.3 per cent; Indians 11.9 per cent, and Other Races just 3 per cent.²⁴ It was also an overwhelmingly male society. The sexes were evenly balanced in the Malay, Bugis and Eurasian communities, but men outnumbered women by a large majority in the Chinese, European and Indian communities.²⁵ This gender imbalance was particularly notable for the Chinese, as it was illegal for Chinese women to emigrate from China, as well as being socially unacceptable.²⁶ Many Chinese men had left wives at home, and undoubtedly all, married and single, saw their long hours and back-breaking work in Singapore as a means to be able to send money home. In this sense, it was a transient society – the intention was to make money and then go back to China.

With such a large gathering of young transient males, it is not surprising that 'the flipside to the successful emporium was an underbelly of piracy, injustice and ... secret societies, vice and opium'.²⁷ Rather than interpret opium smoking as merely a personal addiction, historian Carl Trocki has examined the opium trade in Southeast Asia and argued that 'we can best understand the British Empire east of Suez as of 1800 as essentially a drug cartel'.²⁸ Opium was imported to Singapore from India and the colonial government auctioned the right to the monopoly on the distribution and sale of opium to private individuals or cartels. These 'opium farmers' were Chinese merchants who had the business links to distribute the opium within Singapore and further afield. They were often also the same people who brought coolies to Singapore from China and who owned the pepper and gambier plantations where large numbers of labourers worked – that is, the groups who were most likely to be opium users – and were influential in the Chinese secret societies. Trocki argued that colonial government in Singapore was 'government by opium'²⁹ since the Singapore economy was largely dependent on the price of opium: by the late 1820s, opium farming was regularly

²³ Perry, Kong, and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*: 31.

²⁴ Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 31.

²⁵ Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*, 89-90. They note that in 1833, males outnumbered females by almost 3 to 1 and that this ratio worsened as the century progressed, only starting to even out in the 1930s.

²⁶ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 75. Turnbull notes that despite efforts to increase the numbers of Chinese women, in the mid-1860s there was still only a ratio of one Chinese woman to every 15 men.

²⁷ Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*, 118-119. See also Warren, *Pirates, Prostitutes and Pullers: Explorations in the Ethno- and Social History of Southeast Asia*.

²⁸ Carl Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 50.

²⁹ Trocki, *Opium and Empire*, 70.

contributing 40–50 per cent of the total annual revenues and continued to do so throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.³⁰

In Chapter Three, I examine some of the social consequences of this widespread opium usage among the population of labourers and the poor when I consider the reasons why children were abandoned at the Convent. In the early 1850s, at the time when the Convent was established, Singapore had a nightly curfew and ‘only a rudimentary legal system, few public amenities, and it remained a place of wild rumour and potential riot’.³¹ Yet things were beginning to change, particularly in the European district, where, despite the numerically small population of Europeans, ‘the frontier character of the town gave way to a new colonial-style order’, which was manifested physically by the large stone and brick colonial buildings, many of which were built by convicts from India.³²

Order was important in projecting the image of Empire, and an important part of this was projecting moral authority. This can be seen in the *Straits Times* newspaper report in 1864 on ‘The Social Evil’, which was not prostitution per se, but rather the ‘canker’ of *European* women prostituting themselves.³³ While the article acknowledged that prostitution was tolerated in Europe, it argued that the situation was different in Singapore where Europeans were ‘surrounded by an alien people, exceeding us in numbers in the proportion of 300 to 1, and who are to be controlled by our prestige and not by our strength’. It called on the authorities to ‘remove from among us a spot black enough to lower the entire European character in the native mind’. The article then explained that, while it ‘may not apply to many of the better informed of the Malays and Chinese’, ‘the native mind cannot well distinguish the broad line that in our communities separates this one class from all others’. That is, there was a concern that the veneer of European superiority would be tarnished if European women were prostitutes.

Here we see the colonial conflation of class, race and gender.³⁴ That is, in Britain, one’s class was visible to all, since the social signs could be read by all. In the colonies, regardless of

³⁰ Trocki, *Opium and Empire*, 76.

³¹ Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*, 119.

³² Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*, 119.

³³ “The Social Evil”, *Straits Times*, 18 June 1864.

³⁴ For a detailed examination, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

their background, to a certain extent the British were able to be part of the social elite by the sole virtue of being British. The ideology of white supremacy, based on Social Darwinism, meant that class no longer divided the British colonials since, by their 'whiteness', they were *all* superior. A racial hierarchy replaced the class hierarchy they had been used to in Britain. In this way, in the colonial context, race acted as class. Elaborate social rituals, including attitudes of superiority, modes of dress and displays of pomp and ceremony, maintained the social distance between Europeans and other races.³⁵ Sexual relations between Europeans and other races, either casual or in marriage, confused and complicated this racial differentiation. White prostitution in particular, as well as white poverty, posed a threat to white supremacy and a threat to this shorthand of race and class.

Order was slowly, if somewhat haphazardly at times, being imposed on the Singapore landscape and on the society by the British East India Company administrators. The 'Town Plan' was in place, different areas had been designated for the different races, roads and houses were being constructed and a rudimentary legal system was disciplining society. Both landscape and society were beginning to be tamed and made more familiar. This ordering, the physical manifestation and signifier of progress, was gradually being imposed by the British East India Company administrators and, in a related but different way, also by the missionaries who had arrived soon after Raffles.

Empire and religion: the Christian missionaries

Christian missionaries established a presence in Singapore very early on, with the London Missionary Society (LMS) setting up in Singapore just a few months after the 1819 Treaty was signed.³⁶ In 1821, Father Jacob, an Italian Catholic priest, was ministering to the small number of traders who had relocated from Penang.³⁷ When Father Pécot of the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) called at Singapore in that same year, however, he described the handful of Catholics in a letter to his superior and, presumably thinking of the Parable of the

³⁵ Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 9. Strobel also addresses the issue of sexual relations in Chapter 1: Sexuality and Society: The myth of the destructive female.

³⁶ Maxime Pilon and Danièle Weiler. *The French in Singapore: An Illustrated History (1819 - Today)* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet), 2011, 44.

³⁷ W.T. Southerwood, *Catholics in British Colonies: Planting a Faith where No Sun Sets - Islands and Dependencies of Britain till 1900* (London: Minerva Press, 1998), 24.

Mustard Seed, wrote, 'I do not think this would be any place to sow a mustard seed'.³⁸ Father Imbert stopped briefly on his way to China shortly thereafter and noted there were only about a dozen Catholics among the population.³⁹ The population of Singapore was growing rapidly, however, and within three years a petition was sent to the Catholic Bishop in Bangkok asking for a priest to be based permanently in Singapore.

The Bishop declined, replying that Singapore fell under Portuguese jurisdiction according to the fifteenth-century treaties, significantly the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, in which the Pope divided the world, in terms of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, between the Spanish and Portuguese.⁴⁰ It was, therefore, the Portuguese who were the first to provide a Catholic ministry in Singapore. Yet even after Rome gave the MEP jurisdiction over Singapore in 1827, the tensions between the French and Portuguese priests continued for many years.⁴¹ Theologian John Roxborough has commented that 'the conflict was not without irony – Catholics from two European powers arguing over who should run a mission to Chinese, Indians and Eurasians in a Malay part of the world under British rule'.⁴²

This competition between missionary groups can be seen as one strand in the wider question of the role and influence of Christian missionaries within empire. Their purpose and legacy is contested and, particularly in the immediate aftermath of decolonisation in many parts of the world, they were 'dismissed as hypocritical functionaries of the colonial ruling elite'.⁴³ At the same time as businessmen made money from the free market and exploitation of resources, the people of the empire would be Christianised and 'raised from their state of religious and educational darkness', which, historian Ashley Jackson argued, 'naturally appealed to the

³⁸ Pilon and Weiler, *The French in Singapore*, 44. For the Parable of the Mustard Seed, see King James Bible, Mark 4:30-32: "And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth. But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it."

³⁹ Pilon and Weiler, *The French in Singapore*, 44.

⁴⁰ Pilon and Weiler, *The French in Singapore*, 44-45. The Treaty of Tordesillas was signed in 1494 by the Pope and the Kings of Spain and Portugal.

⁴¹ Southerwood, *Catholics in British Colonies*, 25.

⁴² John Roxborough, "The Roman Catholic Church in Malaysia to 1990," in *Christianity in (West) Malaysia, a denominational history*, ed. Robert Hunt, Lee Kam Hing, and John Roxborough (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1992), 6. He notes also that there were even separate sections in the Singapore government cemetery for Catholics from each jurisdiction.

⁴³ Susan Thorne, "Imperial Pieties," *History Workshop Journal* 63, no. 1 (2007): 319.

nation's moral vanity and fuelled its belief in its own exceptional status and destiny'.⁴⁴ Others have argued that the connection was not as clear-cut. Historian Norman Etherington, for example, has argued that a simple analogy with formal imperialism is misleading and that the relationship between missions and empire was far more complex.⁴⁵

Missionaries had to struggle for the right to preach in territories held by the British East India Company until an act of Parliament in 1813 forced the Company to admit them, and relations were often tense.⁴⁶ On the whole though, colonial officials found it useful to call on missionaries to supply educational and welfare services that they did not want to fund. The Church of England, however, with the British monarch as its Head, was regarded as a 'chaplaincy' church rather than a missionary one; its role was to provide for the religious needs of British citizens living or posted to various colonies, and so was formally part of the British East India Company establishment.⁴⁷

Even given the practical operational difficulties, the relatively low rates of actual conversions, and the occasional criticisms of colonial administrations by missionaries, they were inevitably part of the larger spread of Western influence and ideas. Etherington argues that 'although missions and the official Empire were quite different operations, they play related parts in a larger drama – the spread of modernization, globalization, and Western cultural hegemony'.⁴⁸ Whatever we might think of this larger drama today, Etherington makes a persuasive case for how remarkable the two subsidiary branches of mission work – education and medicine – actually were.⁴⁹ He argued that when European states had barely begun to assume responsibility for public education, missionaries provided free schooling, encouraged girls to be educated, and in many places introduced the first co-educational schooling. They also provided free medical services. Historian Margaret Strobel has also argued that, on the one hand, missionary humanitarian efforts were 'part of the process of imperialism, part of transforming indigenous societies in the interests of European economics and politics'; yet

⁴⁴ Ashley Jackson, *Mad Dogs and Englishmen: A Grand Tour of the British Empire at Its Height 1850-1945* (London: Quercus, 2009), 44.

⁴⁵ Norman Etherington, ed. *Missions and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

⁴⁶ Etherington, *Missions and Empire*, 15.

⁴⁷ John Roxborough, "Early nineteenth-century foundations of Christianity in Malaya: Churches and missions in Penang, Melaka and Singapore from 1786-1842," *Asian Journal of Theology* 6, no. 1 (1992).

⁴⁸ Etherington, *Missions and Empire*, 3-4.

⁴⁹ Etherington, *Missions and Empire*, 261.

they also often generated concrete improvements in the lives of local people.⁵⁰ In this way, we can suggest that missions figure prominently as pioneers of modern welfare states and international philanthropy.⁵¹

Women often took on roles in teaching and nursing. In the Protestant missions, women were usually there as wives, and while they often played active roles in the day-to-day work in the schools and hospitals, they 'were largely invisible in the official image and publications of the society'.⁵² Catholic nuns, too, had travelled to remote parts of the world since 1638 to provide education, healthcare and social services.⁵³ Historian Elizabeth Kuhns argued that the religious life of a nun offered the opportunity for middle-class women to have meaningful careers when few other options existed, and that non-Catholic women envied those who could join religious communities where women were put into positions of responsibility and could acquire high levels of administrative and business skills.⁵⁴ It was in education, and to a lesser extent medicine, that the Sisters of the CHIJ contributed greatly in Singapore.

Conclusion

This chapter has followed the spectacular rise of Singapore as a key part of the British Empire, a free port on the crucial trade route to India and China. I have argued that despite the British East India Company's *laissez-faire* approach to trade and its reluctance to fund social measures, the Enlightenment ideals of progress and science contributed to a desire to stamp order on the landscape and on society.

Yet I am also persuaded by the case put by historian Susan Morgan that it is 'distortingly reductive to try to discuss (Singapore) in the simple dualistic frame of colonizer and colonized'.⁵⁵ She noted that Singapore 'was a "colony" in which the British colonizers actually present were themselves governed until 1867 by other British colonizers not present',

⁵⁰ Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire*, 50-53.

⁵¹ Etherington, *Missions and Empire*, 261.

⁵² Anne Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 43. See also Joanne Keong Mei Lin, Joann, "Sowing the Seeds of Faith: Conversion in the Methodist Church of Singapore 1880-1920", National University of Singapore, Master's Thesis, 2005, for a detailed examination of the Methodist church in Singapore and particularly the role of female missionaries and converts.

⁵³ Elizabeth Kuhns, *The Habit: A History of the Clothing of Catholic Nuns* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 129.

⁵⁴ Kuhns, *The Habit*, 129.

⁵⁵ Susan Morgan, *Place Matters: Gendered Geography in Victorian Women's Travel Books About Southeast Asia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 38.

and whose first priority was British interests in India.⁵⁶ She also noted that Singapore was ‘an imperially constructed’ place which for the first half of the nineteenth century was populated by migrants. Even the term ‘Chinese’ used to describe most of this population, was, she argued, itself dangerously reductive, given that most Chinese immigrants were part of two main loose groups – the ‘Straits-born Chinese’, who did not come from China at all and many of whom were often called Eurasians, and those who were known as the ‘overseas Chinese’, made up of six major groups with different customs and dialects.⁵⁷ With almost all being immigrants, who only intended to stay long enough to make money, Morgan has suggested that the overseas Chinese were ‘simultaneously colonized and colonizers’.⁵⁸ This is consistent with Trocki’s description of the wealthy Chinese businessmen who traded in opium and labour as ‘the beginnings of Chinese capitalism in Southeast Asia’.⁵⁹

In the same way, I have suggested that the role of missionaries was more complex than the traditional view of them as mere agents of Empire, insensitively imposing their religion on others. At their best, they were often key providers of welfare and education services to the local populations. Women played key roles, particularly in encouraging the education of girls. In the next chapter, I explore this in more detail through the experiences of the Sisters of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, who arrived in Singapore in 1854 to establish the Convent and to provide a school for girls, an orphanage and women’s refuge. This French Catholic order operated within a Protestant British colonial setting, yet established an enduring and influential presence.

⁵⁶ Morgan, *Place Matters*, 40.

⁵⁷ Morgan, *Place Matters*, 38-39.

⁵⁸ Morgan, *Place Matters*, 40.

⁵⁹ Carl Trocki, "Opium and the Beginnings of Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002).

Chapter Three

The colonial Convent 1854-1942

Introduction

In Chapter Two, I located Singapore within the broad framework of the British Empire in the nineteenth century and argued that despite a *laissez-faire* free-trade approach to government of the new colony, order was slowly being inscribed on the landscape and on society. I also explored the role of Christian missionaries and suggested that their role was more complex than mere complicity in empire building. Often they were the early, and only, providers of health and education services to the local population. This chapter outlines and examines the establishment of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in 1854 and the work of the Sisters up until the Japanese Occupation of Singapore in 1942.

I start the chapter by tracing Father Beurel's early efforts to establish Catholic schools in Singapore, particularly his attempts to get nuns who could establish and run a girls' school, orphanage and women's refuge. Children were left at the Convent gate almost immediately, so I examine what this tells us about social conditions and attitudes of the times. Money had to be raised to support the work of the Sisters, and I look at how the work of the Sisters was portrayed to the wider community and viewed by it. I discuss the Sisters' refuge for women and their work at the General Hospital, before moving on to examine the development of the girls schools, since their work as educators of girls was particularly significant. The chapter concludes with a summary of how the number and size of buildings on the site grew over the years. As the colony developed and changed, so did the Convent.

Educating children: The impetus for Catholic education in Singapore

Soon after arriving in Singapore in 1832, the MEP established a mission station on Bras Basah Road on land provided by the British Resident, building a small wood and *attap* chapel as well as a Chinese mission. Father Albrand was assisted by a Chinese catechist, and by

September 1833 there were 100 Chinese converts.¹ It was Father Jean-Marie Beurel, however, who having arrived in 1839 became a key figure in the growth of the Catholic faith in Singapore and in the establishment of the Convent. He was French but also spoke English, Malay and Portuguese fluently. By the time of his arrival, the Catholic community had grown to almost 400, probably through a combination of conversion and the general increase in the population of Singapore.² When it became apparent that the chapel was too small for the growing congregation, Father Beurel persuaded the Governor to allocate a plot of land at the corner of Victoria Street and Bras Basah Road for the building of a new church. He set about raising money for construction, writing successfully to Queen Marie-Amélie of France who sent 4,000 francs. In 1847, the Church of the Good Shepherd was finally completed.³

Father Beurel also encouraged the building of churches to serve the different ethnic communities, including those on the plantations. He was assisted by Father John Tschu, the first non-European priest in Singapore, and together they encouraged members of the Chinese community to convert to Christianity.⁴ In one of the unintended consequences, however, the growing number of Chinese converts – converted by both Catholic and Protestant priests – was perceived by the Chinese secret societies as a threat to their authority. Father Albrand, described as ‘the Head of the Devil’, and his catechist had in previous years been followed on a daily basis. Threats were made that converts would have their clothes torn off and their pigtails cut off.⁵ In 1849, Chinese Catholics in the interior of the island were attacked, and in 1851, gangs were sent to wipe out Chinese converts on the inland plantations. Constance Turnbull reports that a rumoured 500 Christians were slaughtered and nearly thirty agricultural settlements destroyed.⁶

¹ Clement Liew, "A Survey of the Development of the Singapore Chinese Catholic Mission in the 19th Century," *BiblioAsia* 3, no. 4 (2008): 15.

² Maxime Pilon and Danièle Weiler, *The French in Singapore: An Illustrated History (1819 - Today)* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2011), 46. The chapel was on the present site of the Singapore Art Museum. Note that the figure is given as 55 Catholics in Singapore in 1841 in W. T. Southerwood, *Catholics in British Colonies: Planting a Faith Where No Sun Sets - Islands and Dependencies of Britain Till 1900* (London: Minerva Press, 1998), 25..

³ Pilon and Weiler, *The French in Singapore*, 48.

⁴ Pilon and Weiler, *The French in Singapore*, 49.

⁵ Liew, "A Survey of the Development of the Singapore Chinese Catholic Mission": 15.

⁶ C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819 - 2005*. 3rd ed (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 71-72. See also Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Year's History of the Chinese in Singapore*. Reprint of 1923 ed. (Singapore: University Malaya Press, 1967), 82-83. Note that this figure is disputed as unconfirmed and too high in Liew, "A Survey of the Development of the Singapore Chinese Catholic Mission", endnote 24.

Father Beurel, having succeeded in building the Church of the Good Shepherd, then set about trying to establish schools, a crucial part of spreading the Catholic faith. Education in the settlement was rudimentary and limited. In 1823, Raffles laid the foundation stone for the Singapore Institution, which he hoped would be a regional facility to instruct the British East India Company's officials about Southeast Asia, educate the sons of neighbouring rulers and chiefs, and produce a professional class of Asian teachers and government officials.⁷ The British authorities, however, were reluctant to invest in education. The policy of the Company was to avoid the burden of any additional expenses in managing areas under its administration.⁸ In 1826, Dr John Crawfurd, holding the position of Resident at the time, wrote to the colonial administrators in Calcutta saying, 'the native inhabitants of Singapore have not yet attained that state of civilization and knowledge which would qualify them to derive advantage from the enlarged system of education held by the Singapore Institution'.⁹ Work on building the Institution stopped, and although Crawfurd's letter had also included proposals for primary education, these were not taken up by Calcutta; hence both levels of education lapsed. Eventually, a group of European merchants raised funds for the completion of the Singapore Institution building in 1835. The Institution operated an upper English-medium school and a lower school that taught partly in English and partly in vernacular languages. But the standard was low, and the Institution and its sister school for girls struggled to survive.¹⁰

The various Christian missionaries could provide schools at minimal cost to the Company, but this led to a piecemeal situation. The Protestant missionaries established temporary headquarters in Singapore – the London Missionary Society (LMS) opened its first school in 1822 and had four schools by 1829. The American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions had nineteen missionaries in Singapore by 1837 and more than 300 Chinese pupils.¹¹ The real focus of these schools, however, was to gain access to China, and when this became possible after the First Opium War, they moved to China and closed their Singapore

⁷ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 42. See also Stamford Raffles, "On the Advantages of Affording the Means of Education to the Inhabitants of the Further East," *The Investigator* July(1821): 300.

⁸ Eugene Wijesingha and Rene Nicolas. *Going Forth: The Catholic Church in Singapore 1819-2004* (Singapore: Commissioned and Published by His Most Rev. Nicolas Chia, Titular Roman Catholic Archbishop of Singapore, 2006), 213.

⁹ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 45.

¹⁰ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 78.

¹¹ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 78. For a more detailed account of education in this period, see Gwee Yee Huan et al., *150 Years of Education in Singapore* (Singapore: TCC Publications Board, 1969).

schools – the Americans in 1842 and the LMS in 1847.¹² The only mission school for girls left in Singapore at that point was the Chinese Girls' School (later known as St Margaret's School), which had been started by the LMS and then taken over by the Society for the Promotion of Female Education in the East.¹³ The Church of England had established a school for Malay boys and another for orphaned girls and reformed prostitutes.¹⁴ The Catholic Church, however, as theologian John Roxborough has argued, was better placed to operate in Singapore as it 'had no need to escape to China', having been involved there for centuries.¹⁵ In addition, its Asian missions had provided extensive experience to draw upon and also had bases near at hand. The MEP had been in the region for some time and had Chinese priests who could minister in the dialects spoken.¹⁶

Father Beurel worked relentlessly to advance his cause of Catholic education. In 1847 he sought help from the headquarters of the De La Salle Brothers (also known as the Christian Brothers), a teaching order known for their free schools for the poor and for teaching in the vernacular rather than Latin. The introduction of religious teachers into their schools was a deliberate policy by the Catholic Church, as education was seen as a 'powerful instrument in the evangelization of pagan peoples'.¹⁷ He again sought funds from the Queen of France, writing, 'I do not wish to rest until I have a good school. It is absolutely necessary to implant in the hearts of children a truly Catholic faith'.¹⁸ In 1848 he wrote to Governor Butterworth saying that he also intended to set up another charitable institution (the Convent), which would include 'a school for respectable ladies, an orphanage and an asylum for destitute widows'.¹⁹ He asked for land opposite the church in Victoria Street to be allocated to him, but the Governor declined the grant of any further land and advised that the site had already been designated for the construction of a courthouse.

¹² Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 78.

¹³ Lily Kong, Low Soon Ai and Jacqueline Yip, *Convent Chronicles: History of a Pioneer Mission School for Girls in Singapore* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1994), 3.

¹⁴ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 78.

¹⁵ John Roxborough, "The Roman Catholic Church in Malaysia to 1990." Chap. 1 In *Christianity in (West) Malaysia, a Denominational History*, edited by Robert Hunt, Kam Hing Lee and John Roxborough. 1-33. (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1992).

¹⁶ John Roxborough, "Early Nineteenth-Century Foundations of Christianity in Malaya: Churches and Missions in Penang, Melaka and Singapore from 1786-1842." *Asian Journal of Theology* 6, no. 1 (Apr 1992): 54-72.

¹⁷ Southerwood, *Catholics in British Colonies*, 23.

¹⁸ Pilon and Weiler, *The French in Singapore*, 52-53.

¹⁹ Wijeyesigha and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth*, 234-235.

Despite these setbacks, in June 1848 he penned a public appeal for funds for the boys' school. He appealed 'to all friends of Christian civilization', so that he could introduce the Christian Brothers' teachers 'into this part of the world, where Christianity and Civilization are yet so little diffused among the Natives'.²⁰ He said they would teach English, French, Chinese and the Malay languages, mathematics, bookkeeping and drawing. It would be open to 'everyone whatever his creed', and while public religious instruction would be given to the Catholic boys, 'the masters will carefully watch over the morals of the whole, whatever their religious persuasion may be'.²¹ He managed to raise 4,000 Francs, with Protestants the main contributors, and also invested his own money in a plantation of 17,000 nutmeg trees that he hoped would also generate funds.²²

Although he had not had substantial success to date, in 1850 Father Beurel sailed for France to lobby the De La Salle Brothers and also to meet with the Superior of the Ladies of St Maur (Les Dames de St Maur). The nuns were a teaching order of lay Sisters who took no religious vows but who led religious lives – many were from aristocratic families.²³ In his pleas to the Superior-General of the Order of the Dames de St Maur, Fr. Beurel had written, in what Lily Kong, Low Soon Ai and Jacqueline Yip described as 'a forthright and refreshingly unembarrassed request':

We want schools. If Christian education does not begin with the child, our efforts to direct adults will lack consistency. For this work, we need the experience, the entire devotedness and continuity of policy which are associated with religious teachers. We want nuns. Will you give me some?²⁴

Getting to Singapore: The arduous journeys of the Ladies of St Maur

Father Beurel managed to return to Singapore with six Brothers and four Sisters, having set off from Antwerp by ship in December 1851. Travel was difficult in the 1850s – sea journeys were long and hazardous and the Suez Canal had not yet been built. Their ship was nearly wrecked while still in the English Channel; it encountered rough seas around the Cape of

²⁰ For the full text, see Wijesigha and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth*, 221.

²¹ Wijesigha and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth*, 221.

²² See Beurel's letters of 14 July 1848 and 4 July 1848 in Rev. Brother Anthony, ed. *The Letters of Fr. J. M. Beurel Relating to the Establishment of St. Joseph's Institution, Singapore*. Translated by Rev. Br. Anthony (Penang: St. Xavier's Institution, 1987). Available on microfilm NA1334, National Archives of Singapore.

²³ For a detailed study of a similar teaching order, see Rebecca Rogers, "Retrograde or Modern? Unveiling the Teaching Nun in Nineteenth Century France." *Social History* 23, no. 2 (1998): 146-64.

²⁴ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 32.

Good Hope and took five months to reach Singapore.²⁵ Adding to the trauma, the Mother Superior had died en route, another Sister had fallen gravely ill, and the only English-speaking Sister ‘spent a lot of time with the Captain during the endless journey’ and decided to leave the Order on arrival in Singapore.²⁶ The Bishop, to Father Beurel’s frustration, directed that the two remaining Sisters (who were only twenty-two years old and therefore considered unable to manage by themselves) and the three younger Brothers relocate to Penang.²⁷

In May 1852, St Joseph’s Institution opened for male students, but plans for the Convent with its girls’ school could not proceed without Sisters. Father Beurel persisted in trying to get land for the Convent. He applied again for the land across from the church that Governor Butterworth had previously denied him. (The building of the courthouse had not eventuated, and the land was being used instead by convicts to store firewood and timber, which disturbed parishioners attending the church.) But once again he was unsuccessful.²⁸ Eventually, in August 1852, using his own funds, Father Beurel purchased Caldwell House. The building had been designed and built in the neo-classical style for a Mr Caldwell by George Coleman, the Superintendent of Public Works, in 1840 or early 1841.²⁹ Father Beurel later bought several adjoining lots being sold off by the Raffles Institution, as well as an adjoining house to be used for the orphans.³⁰ This site at the corner of Victoria Street and Bras Basah Road was where the Convent would eventually be established.

After the failure of the first mission, the Ladies of St Maur dispatched a second mission, this time led by Mother Mathilde, accompanied by two French Sisters and an Irish Sister. Another long and arduous journey – they sailed from Southampton in September 1852, arrived in Egypt and travelled down the Nile, then joined a camel caravan to cross the desert to Suez from where they boarded a ship to Penang, finally landing in October. They waited for a year

²⁵ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 33. According to Kong, Low and Yip, oral sources state that she eloped with the ship’s Captain, p. 34.

²⁶ Pilon and Weiler, *The French in Singapore*, 55.

²⁷ Wijesigha and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth*, 226.

²⁸ Wijesigha and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth*, 235.

²⁹ T.H.H. Hancock, *Coleman’s Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1986), 57. Note, however, that there are varying accounts of how Caldwell House was acquired – other accounts state that it was acquired by Mr Cassette, an American friend of the Sisters.

³⁰ See Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore: From the Foundation of the Settlement under the Honourable The East India Company on February 6th, 1819 to the Transfer of the Colonial Office as Part of the Colonial Possessions of the Crown on April 1st, 1867.*, First published 1902 ed. (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965), 265-66.

in Penang where they opened a school and taught while their headquarters sent more Sisters out. When the third mission eventually arrived, and the Bishop finally gave permission, Mother Mathilde and three Sisters left for Singapore, arriving on 5 February 1854, coincidentally the day before Governor Butterworth's Grand Ball, which I examined in Chapter Two.³¹ So, as the preparations for the ball were in train, this significant effort of getting nuns for the school was finally coming to fruition. It had been a long and difficult process of negotiation by Father Beurel, and no doubt, sheer courage by the women who risked their lives and left all behind to travel to the 'Far East'.

Father Beurel welcomed the Sisters enthusiastically when they arrived in Singapore and took them to the church where a crowd of well-wishers and a mass of flowers awaited them. He then took them to Caldwell House, the house that he had bought in 1852 opposite the church. While in Paris, Sister Mathilde had trained herself for the tropics by sleeping covered with thick woollen blankets and with all the windows closed. That, and her time in Penang, had undoubtedly prepared her for difficulties, but perhaps not for the oversight by Father Beurel who had forgotten to offer the nuns anything to eat and drink, leading Sister Mathilde to write that 'hymns, flowers and complimentary speeches are all very fine but not very filling.'³²

The house, too, was in a pitiful state. Sister Mathilde noted: 'the house itself was correct, but all the rooms were very untidy with many things broken: not a door anywhere, even at the place it is most convenient to have one. To use this humble room, we needed to hide ourselves with an umbrella'.³³ Kong, Low and Yip comment on the incongruity of the Sisters, 'said to be of the most aristocratic order in France', having to use umbrellas for privacy!³⁴ The Sisters used the first storey as the parlour and visitors' room and eventually were able to use the room in the upstairs of the house with a distinctive bay window as their lounge, where they could gather around a large table to write, sew or knit.³⁵ Their motto, still high on the walls of the lounge, reads: '*Marche en ma présence et sois parfait*' (Walk with Me and be perfect).

³¹ Pilon and Weiler, *The French in Singapore*, 55.

³² Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 44-45

³³ Pilon and Weller, *The French in Singapore*, 55.

³⁴ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 45.

³⁵ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 54.

Despite the initial obstacles, only ten days after arrival, they opened the school for girls, with fourteen European and Eurasian students and a handful of orphans supported by fees paid by the other students.³⁶ It came to be known popularly as the Town Convent or the Victoria Street Convent.

The orphans

Remarkably, the Sisters began receiving orphans immediately. Sixteen children were taken in on the first day.³⁷ The numbers of orphans rose steadily over the years, as Figure 5 below shows:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number</i>
1854 (Day 1)	16
1861	93
1862	82
1892	200
1900	212
1901	217
1902	203
1903	166
1904	174
1936	400

Figure 5. Number of Orphans by Year (pre-World War Two).³⁸

The children were brought to the Convent gate at the corner of Victoria Street and Bras Basah Road and received either directly from the person who had brought them, or sometimes found where they had been left. The gate came to be known as The Baby Gate or The Gate of Hope. The historical plaque now at the gate reads (in part):

At this small gate of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) many babies were abandoned in baskets to be picked up by Sisters of the Convent. This was the origin of the Home for Abandoned Babies. For over 100 years, the orphanage was home to children from poor or broken families...³⁹

³⁶ Elaine Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus: 150 Years in Singapore* (Penang: The Lady Superior of Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, 2004).

³⁷ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 249.

³⁸ Numbers for 1854, 1892 and 1936 from Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 62. Numbers for other years from Clement Liew, "The Roman Catholic Church of Singapore 1819-1910: From Mission to Church," (National University of Singapore, 1993). All numbers should be treated with some caution as it is usually not specified if they were the total number of new arrivals for the year, including those who had died, or the actual number in residence at unspecified dates. Note that numbers during and post-World War II are included in Chapter Four.

³⁹ For photograph and full text of plaque, see Wijesigha and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth*, 262.

Many came from poor families and were ill or disabled, and the majority were girls. Dying infants were baptised in accordance with church teachings that allowed any baptised Catholic to baptise another individual in danger of death, in extremis, if a priest was not available. In the case of dying children – usually defined as under seven years of age – consent of the child or the parents was not required.⁴⁰ Those that survived were cared for and educated at the Convent.

To understand why so many children were abandoned, we need to consider the social conditions in Singapore at the time. For many ordinary people, daily life was difficult, with poor housing and health services. As the population of Singapore grew in the early colonial period so, too, did the problems of housing the increasing numbers of immigrants. A severe shortage of housing extended over many years. The overcrowded tenements, poor drainage and water pollution bred disease and contributed to the spread of cholera.⁴¹

Added to these difficulties were the social problems of poverty, opium usage and prostitution. The annual influx of Chinese looking for work and the fluctuations of demand for labour led to many immigrants living on the streets, along with destitute European seamen.⁴² In 1845, at least seventy Chinese beggars died of starvation.⁴³ James Warren, in his study of rickshaw pullers, said they ‘found some solace in the four evils’, opium smoking, prostitution, drinking and gambling.⁴⁴ Opium from India was legal, available and a significant source of income for merchants and the government. A Doctor Little, who campaigned unsuccessfully against opium, estimated in 1848 that 20 per cent of the entire population and more than half of Chinese adults were opium addicts.⁴⁵ While it may not have seriously harmed the wealthier Europeans or Chinese who smoked it, the poor could afford only opium refuse and, once addicted, were reduced to begging, often ending up in prison, the pauper hospital or in

⁴⁰ Sarah Curtis, "Charity Begins Abroad: The Filles de la Charité in the Ottoman Empire," in *In God's Empire: French Missionaries and the Modern World*, ed. Owen White and J.P. Daughton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 101.

⁴¹ See particularly Chapter 3 in Brenda Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

⁴² Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 80.

⁴³ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 80.

⁴⁴ James Warren, *Pirates, Prostitutes and Pullers: Explorations in the Ethno- and Social History of Southeast Asia*. Crawley, W.A.: UWA Press, 2008, 167-168.

⁴⁵ Robert Little, "On the Habitual Use of Opium in Singapore", *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, II, 1848, 1-79. Cited in Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 81.

suicide.⁴⁶ Brothels and taverns were numerous and while some prostitutes were European women from Central and Eastern Europe – there were no British women as this was strictly banned – most prostitutes were Chinese or Japanese, servicing the very large numbers of single Chinese men.⁴⁷ Prostitution (other than by European women) was seen by the colonial authorities as a necessary evil, since there were so few women in the colony – in 1860, the ratio was one female to every fourteen males.⁴⁸ Brothels were regulated, and there was a system of medical inspections to try to reduce the incidence of venereal disease.

Geographers Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh argue that mortality rates in colonial Singapore were indisputably high within the immigrant and indigenous communities, ‘even by Asian standards’.⁴⁹ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, crude death rates within the municipal area averaged over forty per thousand, only falling to below thirty per thousand in the mid-1920s.⁵⁰ The biggest killers were malarial fevers, tuberculosis and beriberi, although cholera, typhoid, smallpox and bubonic plague were also common.⁵¹ Despite most health hazards in Singapore being largely man-made – caused by overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, opium-addiction and so on – health services were minimal, although the Chinese community did run its own medicine institutions, halls and clan-based recuperation centres. The official view of the colonial government on providing medical and health services was that the population was largely transitory and that individuals came to Singapore at their own risk.⁵² This *laissez-faire* approach worked for free trade and thus profits, but meant that social services were minimal. In historian Edwin Lee’s assessment:

The British understood the need to invest in infrastructure and Singapore was their showpiece, an artefact of colonial design and engineering skill...(In contrast) schools, hospitals, and homes for the people were either not enough or not up to standard.⁵³

⁴⁶ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 81.

⁴⁷ James Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870-1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003). For a discussion of European women, see 75-76.

⁴⁸ Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San*, 34.

⁴⁹ Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State* (Chichester: Wiley, 1997), 40. The authors do not specify what they mean by ‘Asian standards’ in this context.

⁵⁰ Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 40-41.

⁵¹ Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 41.

⁵² Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 57.

⁵³ Edwin Lee, “The Colonial Legacy,” in *The Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, ed. Kernial Singh Sanhu and Paul Wheatley (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 40.

Ironically, other than in the crowded slums, Singapore's climate was relatively healthy, and the wealthy of all races suffered mainly from over-indulgence of food and alcohol.⁵⁴ The *Straits Times* newspaper in 1861 wrote, 'we are the healthiest community in the East and attribute no small share of it to our activity and love of outdoor sports'.⁵⁵ Turnbull has written that Singapore's early Christian burial grounds 'are perhaps the dullest in Asia because nearly all prominent Europeans lived to retire to Britain'.⁵⁶

The children left at the Gate of Hope were not so fortunate. Many were near death and died shortly after being left. It is difficult to know the precise circumstances that led to children being left at the Convent. A visitor to the Convent in 1897 reported that five-sixths of the orphans were Chinese.⁵⁷ The Chinese were certainly the largest race by population, making up 61.2 per cent of Singapore's population in 1860, and 67.1 per cent in 1891. By the 1920s, between 10 and 15 per cent of rickshaw pullers had families in Singapore. Large numbers of single Chinese women had fled war-torn China, and the Chinese and British authorities began to adopt a more relaxed attitude towards female immigration.⁵⁸ The large increase in numbers in the orphanage between 1904 and 1936 may simply have been due to the increased number of families between these years.

A detailed examination of burial registers for 1924 has shown that recorded numbers at the orphanage are likely to substantially underestimate the number of babies abandoned at the Convent gate since the number of babies dying was significantly higher than those that survived.⁵⁹ Researcher Genevieve Wong studied the register for the Bidadari Christian Cemetery in Singapore, the cemetery where children from the orphanage, having been baptised and given French Roman Catholic names, were buried. Of the 960 bodies buried, in total, 584 were infants aged between zero and one year, indicating the very high infant mortality rate of the time.⁶⁰ Of these infants, 480, or over 80 per cent, were from the Convent.⁶¹ This does not necessarily suggest that babies left at the gate were not

⁵⁴ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 80.

⁵⁵ "The Fives Club", *Straits Times*, 17 August 1861.

⁵⁶ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 80.

⁵⁷ "The Convent: Impressions of a visitor", *Straits Times*, 14 December 1897.

⁵⁸ James Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore 1880-1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003. 1986), 217.

⁵⁹ Genevieve Wong, "Grave Matters: The Burial Registers in Singapore," *BiblioAsia* 8, no. 4 (2013).

⁶⁰ Wong, "Grave Matters": 20.

⁶¹ Wong, "Grave Matters": 22.

subsequently well cared for – rather it is more likely to be evidence that most were near death at the time of abandonment.

The issues of poverty, prostitution and poor public health services described earlier almost certainly led to some children being abandoned or orphaned. Poor families, realising that a child was near death, may have abandoned a child at the gate simply in the hope that the nuns might be able to give them better care, or knowing that at least the child would be properly buried. Cultural factors, however, also seem to have played an important part in why children were taken to the orphanage. Wong estimates that 467 of the 480 buried infants from the Convent were Chinese.⁶² Of these, two thirds were girls – 311 girls and 156 boys.⁶³

There was little value placed on girls in Chinese society, which was male-centred and patriarchal – the cultural ideal was for a man to produce as many sons as possible to continue the lineage. The Confucian ideology of veneration of ancestors meant that sons were important to carry on this tradition, while daughters were predestined to leave the family on marriage and to break all connections with it. James Warren argues that daughters were considered ‘outsiders’ or virtually slaves, and that common sayings such as ‘a boy is worth ten girls’ reflected and reinforced this devaluation of females.⁶⁴ Even when married, a woman had no say in family matters (except towards the end of her life when she was a mother-in-law or widow); she could neither inherit nor hold any property except her dowry, and she was restricted to the roles of domestic labour and childbearing. Women were believed to be harbingers of evil and misfortune: disease, barrenness and death could all be ascribed to a wife.⁶⁵ Warren has also argued that the peasants of Southeast China (where most Chinese in Singapore were from) ‘have had an especially long and tragic history’ of female infanticide, with girls being abandoned in caves, drowned, or left to die in the fields.⁶⁶ Alternatively, many older girls ‘owed their lives to their parents considering them a possible source of further revenue through sales or pawning as domestic servants to wealthier families

⁶² Wong, “Grave Matters”: 22.

⁶³ Wong, “Grave Matters”: 22.

⁶⁴ Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San*, 29-30.

⁶⁵ Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*, 227.

⁶⁶ Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San*, 30. See also Ann Waltner, “Infanticide and Dowry in Ming and Early Qing China,” in *Chinese Views of Childhood*, ed. Anne Behnke Kinney (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, 1995).

or other “benefactors” who made money on them by reselling them into prostitution in Singapore’.⁶⁷

Historian Anne Kinney, commenting on traditions of female infanticide in China, wrote:

With good reason, the concept of female infanticide is particularly repellent to the Western postmodern reader. Nonetheless, before we judge our premodern Chinese counterparts too severely, it is instructive to remember similar examples of such practices in Western culture.⁶⁸

Historian Hugh Cunningham, who has written extensively on the historiography of childhood, noted that in the mid-nineteenth century, over 100,000 babies were abandoned every year in Europe.⁶⁹ He also argued that there is some evidence to suggest that girls were more likely to be abandoned than boys.⁷⁰ He noted that in parts of France in the nineteenth century, the birth of a boy was treated with gunfire and the birth of a girl with ‘cruel disappointment’, and that mothers without sons would say that they had no ‘children’ even if they had several daughters.⁷¹ Orphanages and foundling hospitals existed across Europe, and Cunningham concluded that ‘the history of abandonment points up the fact that there were constantly being born large numbers of children whom parents were unable or unwilling to rear, and that families would hand over these children to other agencies where they were available’.⁷²

In Singapore, in addition to the issues described above which predisposed a greater number of girls being handed in to the Convent, there were also superstitions about the so-called ‘Tiger girls’ – girls born in the Year of the Tiger, which occurs every twelve years in the Chinese calendar. The astrological Chinese calendar allocates an animal to each year, in a cycle of twelve years, and it was believed that a person’s characteristics were determined by the animal of the birth year.⁷³ Girls born in the Year of the Tiger were considered to be fierce, rebellious, ill-tempered and unpredictable. Good Chinese wives were quiet and compliant,

⁶⁷ Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San*, 31.

⁶⁸ Anne Behnke Kinney, *Chinese Views of Childhood* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, 1995), 7.

⁶⁹ Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, 2nd ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2005), 92.

⁷⁰ Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, 104.

⁷¹ Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, 104.

⁷² Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, 125. See also Juliane Jacobi, “Between Charity and Education: Orphans and Orphanages in Early Modern Times,” *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 1-2 (2009).

⁷³ For a detailed history and explanation, see Shigeru Nakayama, “Characteristics of Chinese Astrology,” *Isis* 57, no. 4 (Winter) (1966): 443-54.

but these 'tiger girls' would cause trouble in the family and would not make good, obedient wives.

Philosopher Judith Butler famously proposed that gender is not a 'natural fact', but rather a social construction that we all perform, a display that we constantly act out through a wide range of behaviours.⁷⁴ She also argued that since gender is a social construct, 'performing one's gender *wrong* initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect'.⁷⁵ The personalities of girls born in the Year of the Tiger were regarded as inherently predestined and unchangeable. They would perform their gender 'wrong', and instead of being gentle and submissive, would be argumentative and headstrong. The potential for disruption to family harmony was so great that, for some families, abandonment was considered a prudent solution. This superstition has been so strong that even today in Singapore there are significant dips in the number of babies born in Tiger years as couples choose to avoid births in these years if possible.⁷⁶

Superstitious beliefs were also evident in other forms. Lucy Lum, writing of 1941 Singapore in her autobiography, recounted the story of her sister, the unfortunate object of these beliefs, who was subsequently adopted out to a woman who could not have children:

'This seventh child will be born in the year of the snake', Popo (grandmother) told us...After the astrologer had studied the charts for my mother and her number-seven child, he had issued a grim warning: 'Your daughter is a tiger,' he said. 'The readings say that the life-water of this expectant grandchild will not be compatible with its mother's. This snake-child will cause three deaths in the family. It carries strong venom. It must not enter the family home'. He said that the new baby must be given away.⁷⁷

Similarly, Janet Lim, whose family lived in China before moving to Singapore, writes of her elder sister in 1923: 'she was never named. Soon after her birth she was given away to a Convent because of a prediction by the gods that if she lived at home I should die.'⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 270-82.

⁷⁵ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", 279.

⁷⁶ See Daniel Goodkind, "Chinese Lunar Birth Timing in Singapore: New Concerns for Child Quality amidst Multicultural Modernity," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 58, no. 3 (1996). See also Cheryl Tan and Magdalen Ng, "KKH doctor on babies born in the year of the Tiger," *Sunday Times*, 10 January 2010.

⁷⁷ Lucy Lum, *The Thorn of Lion City: A Memoir* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007), 64.

⁷⁸ Janet Lim, *Sold for Silver: An Autobiography of a Girl Sold into Slavery in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Monsoon, 2004), 13.

There was also a widespread belief that the ghost of a dead person could inhabit the family home. Historian Henrietta Harrison, writing about the interactions between Chinese families and Catholic orphanages in China, noted that children who died young could not be worshipped as ancestors, and thus it was believed that the spirit of the dead child would be a wandering ghost, who might return to inhabit the body of a younger sibling.⁷⁹ Christian baptism, with the child going to a special Christian heaven, ‘fitted easily into the repertoire of techniques for dealing with ghosts’.⁸⁰ Many of the babies left at the Convent’s gate were near death and it is likely that at least some were abandoned to avoid their death occurring at home and therefore bringing bad luck, although it was also the case that some families were so poor they could not afford a burial.⁸¹ Similarly, many of the orphans were disabled and thus considered to be both a burden and unlucky. Because of the preferential valuing of boys, boys who were abandoned at the Convent were almost always likely to be terminally ill and die soon after abandonment, another reason why there were far fewer boys in the orphanage – figures for the orphanage from 1900 to 1904 indicate an average of only fifteen boys per year.⁸²

One of the few accounts of an orphan being brought to the Convent demonstrates that it was not just poor families who gave up children. On 31 May 1893, the Convent scribe recorded that a five-year-old girl had been delivered to the Convent:

She belonged apparently, to rich parents. But after an accident, she became blind; her parents chose to abandon her because of their prejudices. They therefore brought her to the Convent. When she realised that she was no longer with her mother, she refused all food and did not sleep either. Our Rev Mother had her baptised and sent her to a hospital for treatment. The poor girl’s heart suffered more than her eyes; after a few days, she became insane. Someone brought her back to the Convent where she died a few days afterwards.⁸³

⁷⁹Henrietta Harrison, "'A Penny for the Little Chinese': The French Holy Childhood Association of China, 1843-1951," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 1 (2008): 82.

⁸⁰ Harrison, "A Penny for the Little Chinese": 83.

⁸¹ Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*, 221.

⁸² Liew, "The Roman Catholic Church of Singapore 1819-1910": 53B. In 1900, there were 18 boys; 1901 17; 1902 16; 1903 18; and 1904 22.

⁸³ From *Annals de Singapour*, 31 May 1893. Translated and quoted in "Keeping alive touching moments of time past", *Straits Times*, 12 October 1983.

When an orphaned girl reached eighteen years of age, the Sisters tried to introduce her to a suitable prospective husband. With young Chinese men newly converted to Catholicism, and the shortage of females generally in Singapore, girls from the orphanage could make very suitable brides. Most girls left with at least a primary school education and some vocational and domestic skills so they could find employment.⁸⁴ Those who reached adulthood and were not able to move out to the community, stayed on and continued to be cared for at the Convent.

It would seem likely that some orphans left earlier. An account from the *Annals* of June 1893 describes a mother of four, who wanted a child from the orphanage:

This poor woman has come many times already to supplicate Our Worthy Mother to give her a child. Our Good Mother, tired of her repeated pleas, gave her a little girl on the condition that she brings her back after a certain period. The day arrived, she came, but she cried and sobbed as though she were giving up her own child. With knees on the floor this brave Chinese begged to have the child returned to her. Our Mother gave the child back to her with new promises from her to have the child brought back.⁸⁵

The quality of care of the children in the orphanage was considered to be very good, despite the large numbers of children being cared for. The Governor, opening a new building at the Convent in July 1892, said in his speech, ‘I don’t hesitate to say that there is no institution as well conducted as this one. I know to whom the government turns when it is confronted with poor destitutes, children or adults; and we are sure that they will find here a good home and a good education’.⁸⁶ A visitor to the Convent in 1897 reported in the *Straits Times* that the orphans ‘were entirely without the desponding look which one often sees in orphanages’, and that ‘I cannot do justice to the admirable arrangements here’.⁸⁷ The report went on to say:

This is splendid work. Apart from all else that is done for the good people of Singapore by this institution, this particular feature calls forth the highest praise, to say nothing of its powerful appeal to the charitable feelings of the community.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Wijesigha and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth*, 261.

⁸⁵ From *Annals de Singapour*, June 1893. Translated and quoted in “Keeping alive touching moments of times past”.

⁸⁶ *Annals de Singapour*, July 1892. Translated and quoted in Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 57-58.

⁸⁷ *Straits Times*, 14 December 1897.

⁸⁸ *Straits Times*, 14 December 1897.

Money: Fundraising for the Sisters' good works

Fortuitously, the above visitor was able to tell readers that they would have the opportunity to assist financially later in the week by 'patronising in a generous and helpful way' the Fancy Bazaar to be held in the Town Hall to raise funds for the work of the Convent. This kind of helpful 'marketing' of the Convent was important, as the Sisters were reliant on continued financial support from the Singapore community. The Sisters used part of the fees paid by paying students of the school to fund the orphanage but also sold their needlework and took in sewing jobs from the rich. Embroidery and linen work were a traditional source of funds in convents, being regarded as outside of the world of commerce as it was a feminine domestic pastime and also an excellent meditative activity.⁸⁹

They also held fêtes and other fund-raising events. Their fêtes and concerts were both social occasions for the community and serious fundraising concerns. In December 1892, for example, the *Annals* recorded preparations for the upcoming fête and the anxiety of the Sisters about whether it would raise sufficient money to support their ongoing work: 'The month of December brought us new preoccupations, even new emotions, since the welfare that we can accord our dear orphans in the three sections depends on the successful sale.'⁹⁰ They had been working for some months to make goods for sale and had some local community help, as well as international – several trunks had arrived from France and England 'filled with objects to be divided among the women who have been so kind to help us'.⁹¹ They were realistic about the difficulty of fundraising: 'One thing worries us, however: two Protestant sales have taken place just before ours; it makes us afraid naturally, that the buyers' purses will be empty when they come to us.'⁹² The scribe then recorded details of the actual sale day, writing that 'the highest of Singapore society came'. It seems to have been a successful fundraiser as the scribe wrote, 'it's marvellous to see the zeal of these Protestants for our Catholic works'.⁹³

⁸⁹ Rebecca Sullivan, "Breaking Habits: Gender, Class and the Sacred in the Dress of Women Religious," in *Consuming Fashion: Adorning the Transnational Body*, ed. Anne Brydon and Sandra Niesson (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 121.

⁹⁰ *Annals*. Translated and quoted in "Keeping Alive Touching Moments of Time Past".

⁹¹ *Annals*. Translated and quoted in *The Straits Times*, 12 December 1893.

⁹² *Annals*. Translated and quoted in *The Straits Times*, 12 December 1893.

⁹³ *Annals*. Translated and quoted in *The Straits Times*, 12 December 1893.

The scribe also recorded that ‘our Chinese liberator, Hong Lim, spent \$300’. This was Cheang Hong Lim, a wealthy Hokkien shipowner, opium and spirit farmer and property magnate.⁹⁴ Opium farming was a legitimate business at the time, which the government encouraged and benefited from financially. Turnbull noted that by the end of the nineteenth century ‘there was a warm and genuine feeling of mutual respect and co-operation between the Baba (Straits Chinese) leaders and the British colonial authorities’.⁹⁵ We can see this evidenced in the newspaper reports of Cheang’s ‘At Home’ social event held at his mansion in October 1892.⁹⁶ The event was attended by about 300 people, including the Governor and his wife and the Sultan of Johore.

Cheang, like other Chinese leaders, sought to increase his influence and prestige by charitable works, and thus contributed substantial sums of money to temples, schools, the purchase of a park in Chinatown, and various other philanthropic causes.⁹⁷ He donated the significant sum of \$3,000 –one tenth of the total – to the Convent towards the construction of the new school building that opened in 1892. The three-storey high building, shaped like a broad horseshoe, also embraced a large playing field. The building was described by Sister Hombeline, who became the Principal in 1893, as ‘one of the most beautiful of Singapore ... Roofs are made of white painted boards ... bedrooms are around 200 feet long and 30 feet wide, with an arch in the middle and a surrounding verandah’.⁹⁸ The *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* concluded its report on the opening of the new building by reporting Cheang’s contribution, noting, ‘it is a credit to Singapore, as well as a benefit to the Convent, that there is such a liberal gentleman in the place to help the good work of others’.⁹⁹

The Reverend Mother had to be adept at fundraising in all of these ways and in cultivating positive relations with government officials, key merchants and other influential persons and groups in the colony that might be willing and able to support the work of the Convent. The same newspaper article above noted that the Reverend Mother’s ‘wise guidance’ of the affairs of the Convent ‘unquestionably require no small business capacity, discretion and judgement’. Interestingly, the discretion and judgement over the years included accepting

⁹⁴ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 114.

⁹⁵ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 115.

⁹⁶ “Mr Cheang Hong Lim “At Home”, *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 20 October 1892, 2. Also “Mr Cheang Hong Lim “At Home”, *Daily Advertiser*, 20 October 1892, 3.

⁹⁷ Song, *One Hundred Years History of the Chinese in Singapore*, 168-170.

⁹⁸ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 49.

⁹⁹ “Convent”, *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 2 July 1892, 4.

assistance from other faiths. Figure 6a below shows one of a number of identical fanlight windows – donated by the Buddhist Association– above doors in the orphanage building.¹⁰⁰ The close-up in Figure 6b below shows the Buddha head that appears in the centre of each fan.



Figure 6a Fanlight window. Photo by author.



Figure 6b Close up of fanlight window. Photo by author.

¹⁰⁰ Preservation of Monuments Board, Monuments Open House 2012, walking tour: “Those old Catholic school days”, 17 November 2012.

Similarly, the iron staircases (Figure 7 below) display Islamic designs, reflecting the Muslim contribution that funded them.¹⁰¹



Figure 7 Close up of stair treads Photo by author

These donations suggest that the work of the Convent was appreciated by many sectors of the Singapore community at the time, and was not restricted just to the European sector. They also suggest a tolerance between religious faiths – towards Catholicism by Buddhists and Muslims, and by the Sisters, who presumably took a pragmatic view and saw no difficulty in incorporating symbols of these other faiths into their architecture. A much later indicator of this tolerance is recounted by Maisie Duncan in her memoirs: after the Second World War when the Convent was returning to ‘normal’ operation, the boarders were joined by three Malay princesses while a new palace was built for them.¹⁰² It was hoped this would improve their English language fluency. They participated in all of the daily activities except for chapel attendance, when, instead, they said their prayers in their dormitory.

The Convent also received some funds from the Holy Childhood Association (HCA, l’Oeuvre de la Sainte Enfance).¹⁰³ The organisation, established in France in 1843 by the Catholic Bishop of Nancy, was open to French children under the age of twelve years who agreed to give a small monthly donation so that Catholic missionaries in China could baptise

¹⁰¹“Those old Catholic school days”.

¹⁰² Maisie Duncan, *A Cloistered War: Behind the Convent Walls during the Japanese Occupation* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2004), 183.

¹⁰³ *C.H.I.J. Victoria Street 1854-1983*, (Singapore: Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, 1983), 18-19.

abandoned children and raise them in Christian families. Figure 8 below shows a membership card from 1871.¹⁰⁴ The French inscription reads: ‘Take this child and raise him for Me. I will give you your reward Myself.’

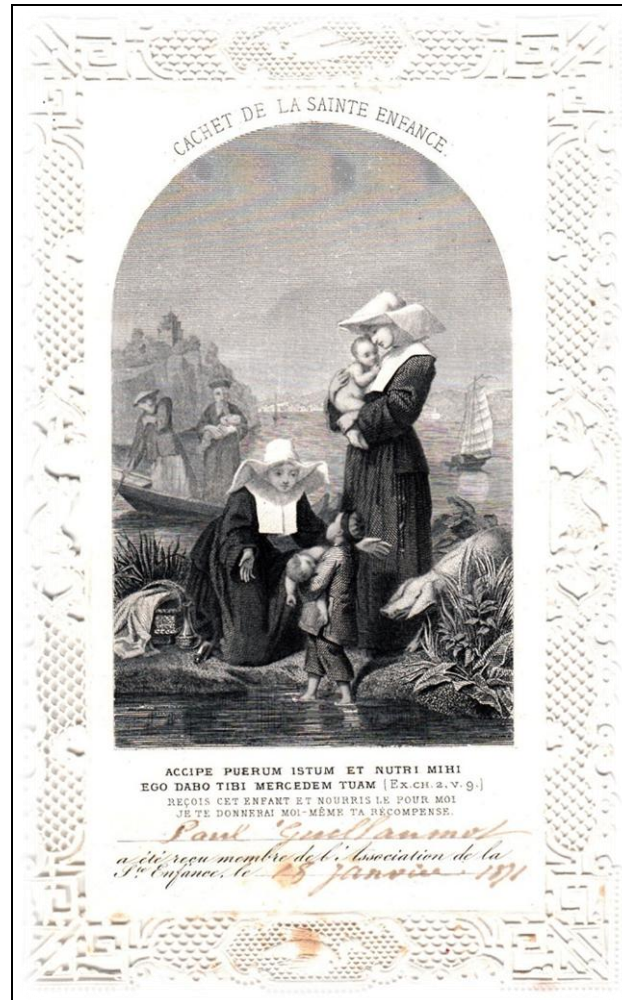


Figure 8. Membership card for the Holy Childhood Association, 1871

The engraving shows a young Chinese boy bringing a sickly or possibly dying baby to two nuns. We can also see a pig standing looking at the child. A key image used by the Association was of the danger of abandoned baby girls being eaten by wild animals. A journalist in 1875 wrote of the good work of the Association in rescuing children ‘whose mothers villainously throw them to the pigs on the day of their birth’.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Source: DePaul University Collection, <http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/Home/Search?q=holy+childhood+association>.

¹⁰⁵ Harrison, "'A Penny for the Little Chinese': 78 and 81. The journalist was Francisque Sarcey, "Les petits chinois", *Le XIX siècle*, 9 November 1875.

By 1869, the Association's annual income was almost two million francs. Membership had spread to Europe and North America; its journal was printed in fourteen languages, and it cared for children in China, Indochina, Africa and Southeast Asia.¹⁰⁶ Harrison has suggested that the HCA is one of the earliest examples of a transnational aid organisation, predating the International Red Cross, which was established in the 1860s.¹⁰⁷ She also suggested that central to its appeal was the idea of the power of French Christian children over the pagan Chinese – a 'power through weakness' – that 'spoke not only of family and sentiment, but also of France and missions and empire, of the exotic and oriental transformed by Christian children'.¹⁰⁸ The Convent received ongoing financial support from the HCA: in 1900, the HCA gave a total of 21,000 francs to the Convents in the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Taipeng and Penang).¹⁰⁹ Figure 9 below shows two nuns with six young 'baby house' orphans in the Convent grounds. They are saying 'a prayer for the friends of the Holy Childhood', presumably in appreciation of the assistance given to the Convent.



Figure 9 A prayer for the friends of the Holy Childhood Source unknown

In these various ways, the Convent survived financially by a combination of the proceeds from the sale of embroidery, fêtes, donations from individuals and organisations, money from

¹⁰⁶ Harrison, "'A Penny for the Little Chinese': 73.

¹⁰⁷ Harrison, "'A Penny for the Little Chinese': 75.

¹⁰⁸ Harrison, "'A Penny for the Little Chinese': 79.

¹⁰⁹ C.H.I.J. *Victoria Street 1854-1983*, 16-19. The photograph in Figure 9 appears without the title in *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. Quill: Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus 1662-2012* (Singapore: Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, 2012), 15.

the HCA, and small government grants. By 1872 they were bringing in about \$10,000 a year, enough to cover their operating costs.¹¹⁰

Sanctuary and nursing: The Women's Refuge and the General Hospital

The Sisters also brought to fruition Father Beurel's vision of a shelter for women. Called The Refuge, it was for 'pagan women' rescued from prostitution and forced marriage.¹¹¹ The number of Chinese women coming from China increased from the 1860s, with thousands being brought to Singapore for the brothels or to be sold as domestic workers.¹¹² It was believed that 80 per cent of the young Chinese girls who came to Singapore in the late 1870s were sold into brothels, and in 1884 it was estimated that there were 60,000 Chinese men in Singapore, but only 6,600 Chinese women, of whom at least 2,000 were prostitutes.¹¹³ Eventually, after a commission of enquiry into the trade in women and in coolie labourers, the government established the Chinese Protectorate in 1877.¹¹⁴ The Chinese Protectorate administered the Act, which provided for the registration of brothels, and also registered prostitutes and founded the Po Leung Kuk (the Office to Protect Virtue), which was advised by a committee of prominent Chinese.¹¹⁵ The Po Leung Kuk also rescued women who had been sold or unwillingly lured into prostitution.¹¹⁶

There were sixty women in residence at the Convent Refuge in 1870, and 200 in 1872.¹¹⁷ Somewhat confusedly, the Monsignor speaking at the official opening of a building in 1892 (referred to earlier) gave the number then as thirty-six women and twenty-six babies – a large drop from the 200 only twenty years before. The speech was reported in the *Annals* and the number was not refuted, so perhaps this reported drop reflected the effectiveness of the work of the Chinese Protectorate.¹¹⁸ Many of the women and the children with them at the Refuge

¹¹⁰ Wijesingha and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth*, 237.

¹¹¹ Liew, *The Roman Catholic Church of Singapore 1819-1910*, 44-45.

¹¹² Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng, and Tan Tai Yong, *Singapore: A 700-Year History: From Early Emporium to World City* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2009), 113.

¹¹³ Turnbull, *A History of Singapore*, 101.

¹¹⁴ Kwa, Heng, and Tan, *Singapore: A 700-Year History*, 113.

¹¹⁵ Turnbull, *A History of Singapore*, 101.

¹¹⁶ Turnbull, *A History of Singapore*, 102.

¹¹⁷ Liew, *The Roman Catholic Church of Singapore 1819-1910*, 44-45.

¹¹⁸ From the *Annals de Singapour*, July 1892, translated and quoted in Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 56. See Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San*, 102-104 for evidence of effectiveness of the Protectorate: in 1883, 70 prostitutes left brothels to marry, and between 1887-1894, the number averaged 50 per year. Some others opted to return to China voluntarily – nearly 500 women returned from Singapore and Penang between 1881-1888.

were eventually baptised, and the nuns also tried to arrange for their marriage to suitable Christian spouses.¹¹⁹

The nuns, although a teaching rather than a nursing order, worked at the Singapore General Hospital as nurses from 1885 to 1900. Bishop Gasnier had raised the idea in 1885 of the church setting up a hospital as an alternative to the General Hospital, as there was concern about the hospital's standards.¹²⁰ The government had been contemplating hiring European nurses for the hospital, and on hearing of the Bishop's plan, approached the Church to provide nuns to run the General Hospital instead.¹²¹ The Sisters agreed, but there was opposition from many prominent Protestants: 145 Europeans signed a petition, fearing that the Catholic Church would then control an 'undenominational institution'.¹²² Despite this, the plan went ahead and the nuns took over in August 1885. By the next year, they had received a public commendation from the Principal Medical Officer.¹²³ The government viewed the nuns as, effectively, hired European nurses –the Sisters, though, did not see themselves as hired staff, but rather as serving those in need as part of their vocation. This difference, and also the arrival in Singapore of some trained nurses in 1900, led to the Sisters' withdrawal from the General Hospital in 1903.¹²⁴

Students and boarders: the Convent schools

When the Sisters started teaching just after their arrival in Singapore, they had two classes – one for fourteen fee-paying European and Eurasian children and another for sixteen orphans and the nine boarders who could not afford to pay fees.¹²⁵ The school grew slowly at first; the European and Eurasian population (both Catholic and Protestant) of Singapore was still relatively small, and the other ethnic groups initially found the Sisters very 'foreign'.¹²⁶ We cannot know now just in what way these groups found the Sisters 'foreign'. We can speculate that the sight of the nuns was unusual, in that they wore a distinctive heavy, long, black woollen habit with a black hood, very different from the clothing worn by other European

¹¹⁹ Liew, *The Roman Catholic Church of Singapore 1819-1910*, 44-45.

¹²⁰ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 248.

¹²¹ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 248.

¹²² Liew, *The Roman Catholic Church in Singapore 1819-1910*, 52. This is somewhat ironic as, in 1860, the Governor had admonished an Anglican chaplain who had distributed anti-Catholic tracts while doing his rounds in the hospital – see Roxborough, "The Roman Catholic Church in Malaysia to 1990," 6.

¹²³ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 248.

¹²⁴ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 248.

¹²⁵ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 45.

¹²⁶ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 47-49.

women in the colony. Theologian Eric Reinders has suggested that missionaries in China in the same period were ‘objects of spectacle’, since no matter how much they tried to blend in, ‘in certain fundamental ways, the missionary body was non-negotiable. The missionary body was always more or less foreign’.¹²⁷ It is likely, too, that there was some suspicion or apprehension about the aims of a Catholic school. Again, in the context of China, many Chinese feared that missionaries were ‘kidnapping children, eating them, tearing out their eyes and hearts, or burying them under the foundations of the huge churches they were building’.¹²⁸

In time, however, the Asian population ‘warmed to the Sisters’ presence’, and by 1862 the school had grown to 145 students (82 of whom were non-fee paying).¹²⁹ The next year, the school was divided into two sections – one for fee-paying students and one for ‘the poorer classes of society’ who received education ‘more consistent with their social status’.¹³⁰ This suggests that the school was, at least to some extent, divided not by race but by wealth and social status. This reflected the social reality at the time. Girls who were poorer would be likely to need basic practical skills to get work later, particularly if it were to be as a housekeeper or servant, or to be able to run their own household without servants. We can see views about the social role of girls and women reflected in the 1870 Legislative Council Select Committee enquiry into the state of education (known as the Woolley Report).

It considered ‘that a more practical system might be adopted with advantage in the female schools’, since

the education imparted in several, causes the pupils to imbibe ideas above their stations, and renders them discontented when they return to their homes. They are thereby unfitted for the duties they are expected to perform, and, unless fortunate enough to marry, often fall to a lower condition in life than that to which they originally belonged.¹³¹

The report does not go into further detail and does not mention the CHIJ school specifically, so we do not know whether these concerns applied. But it reminds us that gender, race and class were inter-related in complex ways.

¹²⁷ Eric Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies: Christian Missionaries Imagine Chinese Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 176.

¹²⁸ Harrison, “A Penny for the Little Chinese”: 89.

¹²⁹ Gwee Yee Huan et al., *150 Years of Education in Singapore*: 19.

¹³⁰ Wijesingha and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth*, 237.

¹³¹ Reproduced in full in Francis Wong and Gwee Yee Hean, eds., *Official Reports on Education: Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, 1870-1939* (Singapore: Pan Pacific Book Distributors, 1980), 11-14.

Education in Singapore, generally, at the time was relatively minimal. The different racial communities had their own vernacular schools largely independent of any central control; there were the missionary schools as well as the ‘free-schools’, which accepted students regardless of race and class, started by individuals with government connections, funded by private subscriptions and which taught in English.¹³² It became more systematic, however, when the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Malacca and Penang) became a Crown Colony in 1867, answering directly to the Colonial Office.¹³³ The first Inspector of Schools was appointed in 1872; by the 1890s, local businesses and the local colonial bureaucracy were keen to employ cheaper, locally-educated clerks; and by the early 1900s, the government had established an Education Code and an Education Board and had greatly increased its expenditure on education.¹³⁴

After an inspection in 1881, the Convent school was officially classed as a ‘government-aided school’ and became eligible for government funding.¹³⁵ This brought with it requirements to comply with government education policies. Because public funds could not be used for proselytising, religious instruction could only take place before or after official school hours. From its establishment and up until the late 1880s, the emphasis of the Convent school was on moral and domestic education: sewing, knitting and cookery were important, but only simple reading, writing and arithmetic were taught. The emphasis was on raising good Catholic girls who would become good housewives, ‘particularly significant since the Convent’s objectives included taking in prostitutes as well as keeping girls away from vices’.¹³⁶ There was no emphasis in the early years on equipping the girls with job skills since there was a ‘prevailing public ethos’ that it was a disgrace for women to work, and anyway jobs for women were scarce.¹³⁷ Once again, this would seem to reflect the social

¹³² Robbie Goh, “The Mission School in Singapore: Colonialism, Moral Training, Pedagogy, and the Creation of Modernity.” Chap. 3 In *Asian Migrants and Education: The Tensions of Education in Immigrant Societies and among Migrant Groups* edited by Michael Charney, Brenda Yeoh and Chee Kiong Tong. 27-37 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 28.

¹³³ Goh, “The Mission School in Singapore”, 27-28. See also Tan Yap Kwang, Chow Hong Kheng, and Christine Goh, *Examinations in Singapore: Change and Continuity (1891-2007)* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2008), 7. See also Gwee, *150 Years of Education in Singapore*, Chapter 2 for a more detailed account of developments in this period.

¹³⁴ Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*: 181. See also Gwee, *150 Years of Education in Singapore*, Chapter 2.

¹³⁵ Wijesighe and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth*, 237.

¹³⁶ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 64.

¹³⁷ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 64.

stratification of Singapore society at the time, since, to survive financially, poorer women would have had to work in some way, even informally and even if married.

From 1886, however, this changed when the government began to provide grants to girls' schools based on the number of passes obtained and the number of students.¹³⁸ This, along with changing social attitudes towards education for girls, led to an enlarged curriculum and increased enrolment. The government introduced a grading system for schools in 1899 – Grade 1 for the best, Grade 2 for the next best, and Grade 3 for schools with the poorest academic standards. The CHIJ school was classified Grade 1.¹³⁹ This suggests that from early days, the school was developing as an elite institution, and the fact that the opening of a new building in 1892 was attended by the Monsignor, the Governor, the Sultan of Johore and the Consuls of France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Holland and Russia also reflected the status and reputation of the school.¹⁴⁰ Kong, Low and Yip have argued that the good academic results were possible because prior to the 1900s, the school was attended almost entirely by English-speaking children, as most Catholics were Eurasians who were English-speaking.¹⁴¹ They could understand the subjects taught because of their grasp of English, and because English had been the medium of instruction from the beginning. There had been some practical difficulties at times for the Sisters in executing the policy of teaching in English, as many of the first nuns could not speak English, although the problem eased with the later arrival of English-speaking nuns from Ireland.

In 1904 students sat for the first Junior Cambridge examinations, and in the next year prepared for the Senior Cambridge examinations, which would mark the start of the Convent's secondary school.¹⁴² By the end of the 1920s, the Convent school had introduced geography, literature, history, algebra, geometry, science, shorthand, typing and book-keeping.¹⁴³ Lay teachers had begun to be employed to ease some of the workload from the Sisters, although there was a turnover due to resignations when teachers left for higher pay or to get married. Up to the 1920s, pregnant teachers were not allowed to teach as it was

¹³⁸ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 64-65.

¹³⁹ Gwee et al, *150 Years of Education in Singapore*, 27. Also Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 68.

¹⁴⁰ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 56.

¹⁴¹ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 69.

¹⁴² Tan, Chow and Goh, *Examinations in Singapore*, 12. Also Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 68-69.

¹⁴³ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 65.

considered an embarrassment for them to be seen in the classroom.¹⁴⁴ Many of the lay teachers were former students, and many were Eurasian.¹⁴⁵ The lay teachers taught mainly mathematics, geography and history, while the nuns taught English, French, Latin and domestic science.¹⁴⁶

The school had also begun to encourage extra-curricular activities such as physical training, and sports such as netball – a progressive move for a girls' school as, until that time, it had been considered immoral for girls to be seen out of doors, let alone playing sport.¹⁴⁷ Perhaps this was in response to the Board of Education's inclusion of physical education in the curriculum – although their emphasis was on military drill and Swedish gymnastics.¹⁴⁸ A school orchestra was also formed and played at the school's annual exhibition, a week-long event where students displayed their art and needlework and staged musical performances and plays attended by high-ranking officials and wealthy businessmen.¹⁴⁹

Boarders also formed an important part of school life. Elaine Meyers writes that for day pupils there was little difference between the everyday experience of fee-paying and non-fee paying pupils, but the differences were more apparent for the boarders, who were divided into two categories: 'First boarders' paid high fees and received better food and a dormitory with fewer beds; 'Second boarders' paid what they could afford. They ate together in the refectory, but the First boarders had glasses and butter, while Second boarders had metal tumblers and margarine, again reflecting in a practical way the social stratification of the wider society. Everyone ate off fine china, though, thanks to the nearby Raffles Hotel donating its older crockery to the Convent.¹⁵⁰

Kong, Low and Yip have recounted the girls' routines in some detail.¹⁵¹ They noted the boarders were often girls from broken homes or from Peninsula Malaysia, Sarawak and even Nepal. They ranged in age from about three years of age to their late teens. Boarders were

¹⁴⁴ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁴⁵ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 57.

¹⁴⁶ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 57.

¹⁴⁷ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 69.

¹⁴⁸ Lim Lai Kuan and Peter Horton, "Sport in the British Colony of Singapore (1819-1900s): Formation, Diffusion and Development," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29, no. 9 (2012): 1339.

¹⁴⁹ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 53.

¹⁵⁰ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 77-78.

¹⁵¹ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 76-84.

rarely allowed to go home except during the long holidays, although parents could visit on Sundays. The older girls were expected to take care of the younger ones, and carry out rostered tasks, such as laying the tables and cleaning the toilets. Early morning mass took place at 6.15 am – compulsory for Catholics – and after school they proceeded together to the chapel to say the rosary. At the communal bath-time each student wore a chemise of sufficiently thick fabric to protect their modesty, even when wet. The chemise remained on while each girl soaped her arms and legs and then put a hand down the chemise to soap her torso. This bath-time modesty was still in place in the 1940s: Maisie Duncan, a boarder at the time, has written that it was conducted in silence, and if naked bodies were inadvertently exposed ‘to the shocked gaze of the bathroom audience ... eyes were immediately averted and no comments were made. Only the brave dared to laugh, for this was a serious world and the human body was not an object of levity’.¹⁵²

Duncan also recalled that meals were eaten in silence during the week and that talking in the dormitory was a punishable offence – ‘we boarders and orphans virtually lived the lives of young novices waiting to take their vows’.¹⁵³ Curiously, a c1920 series of three postcards of the Convent was produced, showing the interior of the Chapel, the boarders’ refectory and the boarder’s dormitory.¹⁵⁴ The dormitory shows the rows of beds down each side of the room, each covered with a mosquito net. There are similar interior views of the dining room at Raffles Hotel from the same period, so perhaps the fact that there was a postcard available of the boarder’s dormitory indicates the importance of the institution to Singapore society – or that there were sufficient boarders who might use such a postcard to write to their families.

Despite the existence of the nearby Catholic boys’ school, St Joseph’s Institution, a handful of boys attended school at the Convent between 1900 and the 1920s. Possible reasons for this included that some parents preferred their daughters to be accompanied to school by their brothers; sometimes the boys lived near the Convent; and sometimes the boys were orphans or abandoned children, who were placed in the school with their sisters.¹⁵⁵ The boys could

¹⁵² Duncan, *A Cloistered War*, 62

¹⁵³ Duncan, *A Cloistered War*, 61.

¹⁵⁴ Cheah Jin Seng, *Singapore: 500 Early Postcards* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), 160-61.

¹⁵⁵ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 70. David Marshall, the Chief Minister of Singapore just before independence, attended school at the Convent.

remain at the Convent until ten years of age, when they transferred to St Joseph's Institution.¹⁵⁶

To cater for the increasing numbers of Chinese students from about the early 1900s, the Sisters bought the adjoining Hotel Van Wijk in 1931. While the hotel was purchased to provide additional facilities, it had been a 'family house' for prostitutes for some time.¹⁵⁷ When the Sisters were able to purchase it, the *Annals* expressed another related concern for students' moral well-being:

The reasons for this acquisition were very serious: the old hotel would be very probably demolished by the purchaser and replaced by a high building, the vicinity of which could be a moral danger for our boarders as their dormitory is very close to the land.¹⁵⁸

It reopened in 1933 as a school for Chinese girls, with forty students in two primary school classes and just two staff members – a Chinese teacher and a Sister from France engaged as the Principal and who also taught English.¹⁵⁹ Within the first few years, enrolment more than doubled. By 1936, it provided a full primary school education, and by 1941 a full secondary education.¹⁶⁰ Originally known as the Victoria Girls School, it later became St Nicholas Girls School.

Robbie Goh has examined the role of 'mission schools' in Singapore, and although the Sisters were not missionaries per se, the Convent schools can be regarded as part of the 'mission school' movement. Goh argued that the schools were not intended to actively proselytise and convert, but rather to influence the students with a view to future conversion.¹⁶¹ 'Moral teaching', with its emphasis on ethics, did not necessarily oppose or differ from Confucian ethics and so could appeal to Chinese families who prized English education for its ability to secure a good job as a clerk or civil servant.¹⁶² Education in English could create a native elite able to play a part in the colonial government, as well as spread European ideas and values throughout their communities.¹⁶³ This discipline and

¹⁵⁶ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 47.

¹⁵⁷ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 62. See also Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San*, 41.

¹⁵⁸ *Annals*, undated. Translated and quoted in Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 62-63.

¹⁵⁹ <http://www.chijstnicholasgirls.moe.edu.sg/Page/Primary/History.aspx>, accessed 7 October, 2012.

¹⁶⁰ <http://www.chijstnicholasgirls.moe.edu.sg/Page/Primary/History.aspx>, accessed 7 October, 2012.

¹⁶¹ Goh, "The Mission School in Singapore", 33.

¹⁶² Goh, "The Mission School in Singapore", 32 and 34.

¹⁶³ Goh, "The Mission School in Singapore", 28-29.

submission to authority could be brought ‘into the service of a new immigrant community concerned with economic and infrastructural development’, as well as forge an ‘organic unity’ out of the disparate cultural and ethnic groups.¹⁶⁴ Goh concluded that Singapore mission school organisation and pedagogy can thus be seen as an inherently *modernist* enterprise.¹⁶⁵

The buildings: the Convent as city

The number of buildings and, indeed, the physical size of the Convent itself steadily increased over time. Perhaps echoing the research frustrations of Kong, Low and Yip referred to earlier, Researcher Gretchen Liu commented that ‘just how the Convent expanded to embrace the entire block has proven an elusive subject to document as records kept by the Sisters are often vague on the specifics of land and buildings’.¹⁶⁶

The most significant addition was the imposing new chapel designed and built by Father Charles Nain in the first years of the twentieth century. Father Nain was a trained architect and also the assistant parish priest at the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd. The design of the chapel is thought to have been inspired by the Gothic churches of his French hometown of Farges.¹⁶⁷ It was (and remains) large and elaborate, with flying buttresses on either side of the building and a spire five stories high. A Gothic walkway joined the chapel with Caldwell House and supporting the chapel and walkway were 648 capital columns, each carved with a unique image of flora and fauna.¹⁶⁸ The wooden pews and ornamentation came from France and the elaborate stained glass windows from Belgium. Completed in 1903 and consecrated in 1904, the chapel, Meyers writes, ‘was undoubtedly the grandest religious building in Singapore at the time.’¹⁶⁹

By the early twentieth century, the Convent was basically complete, although there were some additions after that time.¹⁷⁰ By 1983 when finally acquired by the government for urban redevelopment, the site covered 2.8 hectares.¹⁷¹ As Chapter Seven will discuss in more detail,

¹⁶⁴ Goh, “The Mission School in Singapore”, 37.

¹⁶⁵ Goh, “The Mission School in Singapore”, 37.

¹⁶⁶ Gretchen Liu, *In Granite and Chunam: The National Monuments of Singapore* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1996), 256.

¹⁶⁷ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 52.

¹⁶⁸ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 52.

¹⁶⁹ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 52.

¹⁷⁰ Liu, *In Granite and Chunam*, 255.

¹⁷¹ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 138.b

two of the CHIJ buildings – Caldwell House and the Chapel – are now designated as National Monuments, testifying to the significance of the Convent in the history of Singapore.

The photograph below (Figure 10) shows the Convent as it was in the 1920s.¹⁷² A Sister has written notes (in French) to identify the various buildings and playing fields.

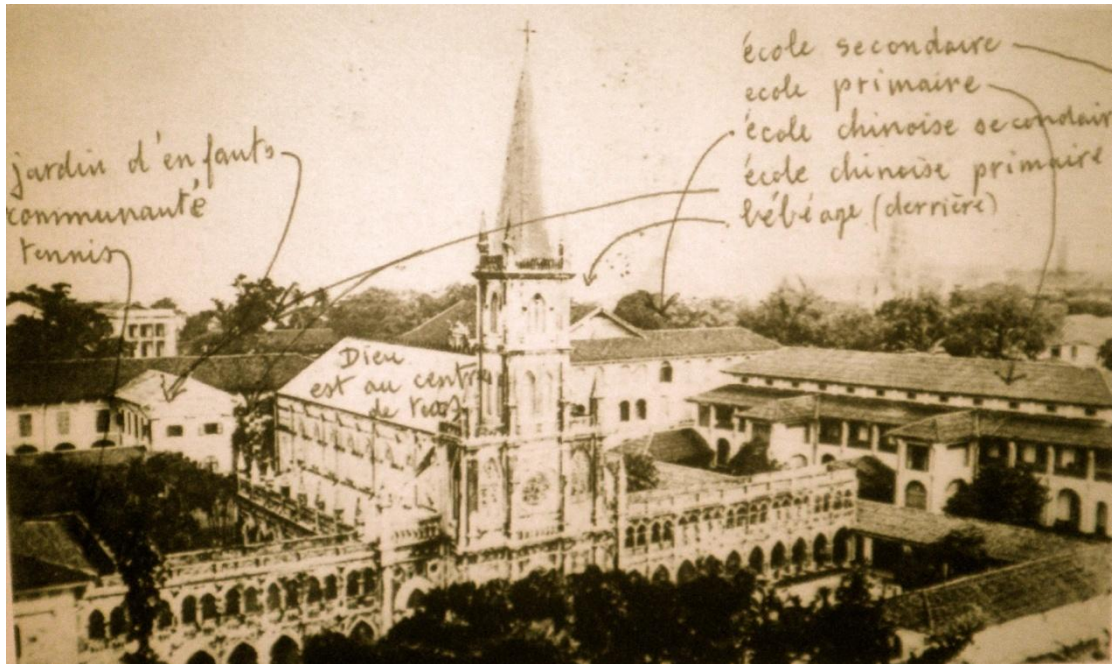


Figure 10 View of the Convent in the 1920s with handwritten notes

The note written over the roof of the chapel (*'Dieu est au centre de tous'*) reminds us that God is at the centre of everything. Physically, the chapel was not quite in the centre of the complex, but its size would have dominated the site and the streetscape. The notation is most likely meant to be read in a more ideological or spiritual sense: the chapel was in the centre of everything, in that the Sisters' thoughts were turned to worship, and that everything that they did at the Convent aimed to further the work of God as they understood it.

P.D. Smith, in his book *City: A Guidebook for the Urban Age*, describes how cathedrals in the Middle Ages (and thereafter) were built in such a way as to evoke the ideal celestial city of the Book of Revelation. Inside the cathedral 'the devout left the city of man in the street outside and ... entered the city of God'.¹⁷³ Without romanticising the Convent, I suggest that it operated in a small way as a walled city – one entered through the gate to a number of

¹⁷² Photograph taken by author at the CHIJ Museum, Singapore. See also Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 55.

¹⁷³ P. D. Smith, *City: A Guidebook for the Urban Age* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 109.

buildings with differentiated and sometimes complex uses, populated by hundreds of people of different ages and roles. Food was purchased and brought in from outside, then prepared and the populace fed and housed. Procedures and rules, with the Mother Superior at the head, governed a daily rhythm of events and comings and goings. In a sense, one went into the Convent and left the outside world behind.

While the chapel was perhaps at the centre of everything on the site, at the same time the programs at the Convent – the schools, the orphanage, the refuge– meant that the primary use of the site was about much more than the chapel. The outside world, with its problems and needs, was also very much a consideration. The Convent had evolved over the years, adapting to changing circumstances in tandem with the changes which took place in Singapore itself, the port-city that, to use Turnbull's categorisations, had grown from the 'spirited and splendid little colony', through the 'high noon of Empire', and into 'the Clapham Junction of the Eastern Seas'.¹⁷⁴ The Convent reflected these changes, not only in its physical growth, but also in its educational and social programs. And, as the next chapter will show, in 1942 all of this was dramatically affected by the outside world in the form of World War Two and the Japanese Occupation.

¹⁷⁴ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*. See her chapter headings: Ch. 2 "This Spirited and Splendid Little Colony", 1826-1867; Ch. 3 High Noon of Empire, 1867-1914; and Ch. 4 "The Clapham Junction of the Eastern Seas", 1914-1941.

Chapter Four

The Japanese Occupation and independence: Worlds turned upside down

Introduction

The period of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore during World War Two, the focus of this chapter, was a time of tremendous disruption and crisis for both the Convent and for Singapore as a whole. It has become a metonym for the awakening of a desire for independence and nationhood. Prasenjit Duara has argued that history is often pressed into the service of the nation to reinforce national mythologies and ideologies, and in this way, the Occupation and its aftermath of independence have become key parts of the nation-building narrative.¹ It has also become part of the narrative of the Convent, particularly the period at Bahau.

This chapter does not attempt to cover the events and issues of the Occupation in detail, but instead to explore the experiences of the Convent during and after the war and to extract key themes. Much of the focus on the Fall of Singapore and the subsequent Japanese Occupation, particularly from Australian scholars, has been on the treatment of prisoners of war in Singapore and, to a lesser extent, the internment of civilians. I want to focus instead on those who were not interned and who had to survive day by day in a 'world upside down'.² I also want to view this time through the lens of food scarcity, since this preoccupied daily life. For the first time in Singapore, the doors to the global pantry were closed, a potential disaster for a small island with no significant food production of its own. For the Convent, among the many other changes imposed, the Grow More Food campaign led to conversion of the Convent grounds into vegetable gardens and, eventually, the exodus of many of the nuns and children to the ill-fated Bahau farming settlement in Malaya. In Singapore today, this period of wartime food scarcity is remembered as a powerful and defining historical moment.

¹ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995). Also Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), particularly Chapter 10.

² Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 330.

Power

Imperialism, by its very nature, is the imposition of power and influence, and during World War Two, Singapore was a site of contestation between two imperial forces, Britain and Japan. Japan's entry into the war was a further extension of its quest for an empire of its own, which as well as bringing international prestige, could potentially be a source of food supplies and raw materials for industry.³ Southeast Asia scholars Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper have argued that 'if India was the jewel in the (British) imperial crown, Malaya was the industrial diamond'.⁴ Malaya produced almost 40 per cent of the world's rubber in 1939 and almost 60 per cent of its tin.⁵ Singapore's port facilities and strategic location were key to Japan's push to create the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which would comprise Japan, China, Manchuria and Southeast Asia, with Singapore as the defence headquarters and capital of the region.⁶ Scholars like Ann Stoler and Anne McClintock have analysed Western imperialism in terms of 'articulated categories' such as gender, race and class, and I contend that we can examine the Japanese Occupation of Singapore in much the same way.⁷

The Battle for Singapore was over in only seventy days, despite British confidence in 'Fortress Singapore' right up until the end – in early December 1941, the press were still being told that the Japanese were too afraid of British power to attack Malaya.⁸ The first Japanese bombs fell on Singapore in the early hours of 8 December 1941, three hours after the attack on Pearl Harbour. Although the main Japanese targets in Singapore were the airfields, they also bombed Raffles Place, perilously close to the Convent.⁹ The school was in its Christmas break and student numbers were much reduced, but the Sisters, the orphans and some boarders were still in residence. In addition, numbers had steadily swelled with others who had sought refuge there – the Carmelite nuns whose own premises were close to the harbour and railway station, children from the Good Shepherd mission, as well as families

³ For a discussion about food shortages, see Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food* (London: Penguin, 2012), Chapter 2.

⁴ Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945*: 33.

⁵ C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819 - 2005*. 3rd ed. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 172.

⁶ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 199.

⁷ Ann Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 634-60. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 4.

⁸ John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 100-01.

⁹ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 169.

who had fled from Malaya or had otherwise considered it safer to be in the centre of town. Over the weeks of the aerial assault, it is estimated that up to 2,000 people were within the Convent walls.¹⁰ Even on the day that Singapore surrendered – 15 February 1942 – bombing was heavy and the Convent was hit. Trying to protect the complex, the Reverend Mother had laid out a large red cross (the Catholic Cathedral across the road was used by the British as a military hospital), but immediately thereafter, the Convent was hit again.¹¹ By the end of the attack, four bombs had fallen on the Convent: near the main gate, near the orphanage, on the field near the chapel, and another on the St Nicolas school field, with several people injured, and five dead.¹² The Baby House was demolished, there was a large crater next to the chapel, and some of the chapel's stained glass windows were shattered.¹³

After the surrender, the Japanese military authority quickly exerted its power in numerous ways, although the more immediate disruption for the population was the proclamation renaming Singapore and aligning it with Japan. Singapore became Syonan-to, (pronounced 'Shonan'), which translated as 'the Light of the South'. Clocks were reset to Tokyo time, the Japanese calendar was imposed (1942 suddenly became 2602), the *Straits Times* newspaper became the *Syonan Times*, place names changed, and the Japanese Military Dollar was decreed the sole currency.¹⁴ It was a requirement to learn to speak Japanese, bow to the emperor and to sing the Japanese National Anthem. In Benedict Anderson's conception of nations as imagined political communities, members imagine themselves as belonging to a common sovereign community, sharing general beliefs and attitudes.¹⁵ Newspapers, language and standardised calendars and clocks help to generate and reinforce a sense of simultaneous national experiences and a 'deep horizontal comradeship'. The abrupt imposition of, in effect, the new nation of Syonan-to on the population of Singapore meets none of Anderson's conditions of a shared conception of nation. Similarly, the imposition of newly 'invented

¹⁰ Lily Kong, Low Soon Ai, and Jacqueline Yip, *Convent Chronicles: History of a Pioneer Mission School for Girls in Singapore* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1994), 103-04. They note that another account gives the numbers as 60 nuns and 300 children. The oral history of Kitty Fogh, a former teacher, gives it as about 1000 (500 children, 500 Europeans and Eurasians, not only Catholics: Kitty Fogh, Oral History interview, Education in Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 1993, Accession no. 001417).

¹¹ Elaine Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus: 150 years in Singapore* (Penang: The Lady Superior of Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, 2004), 60.

¹² Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 60.

¹³ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 60.

¹⁴ Lee Geok Boi, *The Syonan Years: Singapore Under Japanese Rule 1942-1945*, vol. 2, Reflections and Memories of War (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2009).

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised ed., London: Verso, 2006. 1983).

traditions', such as veneration of the Emperor and annual commemorations of the surrender of Singapore, attempted to link the new 'nation' with a glorious past, a Japanese, not British, past.¹⁶

British and Allied civilians were interned, and those Europeans and Eurasians who were not interned had to wear red armbands. At the Convent, the French Sisters avoided internment because Vichy France was allied with Germany, and Irish Sisters were also exempt because Ireland was neutral. People lived in fear of the Japanese Military Police (the Kempetai) and of incurring the wrath of any Japanese soldier they might meet in the street. Drawing on the work of philosopher Michel Foucault and of sociologist Henri Lefebvre, geographers Brenda Yeoh and Kamalini Ramdas have described it as a 'landscape of fear, manifested by a strategy of spectacle and surveillance'.¹⁷ In this way, the spectacle of public torture, public executions and victory parades was used to instil fear in the population and thus inculcate discipline. Even the ritual requirement to bow to Japanese soldiers in the street was 'a localized form of landscape spectacle'.¹⁸ Surveillance was overt, but the use of secret agents and informers meant that it operated to subdue the population even when unseen. It operated like Foucault's panopticon in that power was often visible but also, at times, unverifiable, since individuals could never be sure if they were being observed.¹⁹ The fear of being observed and reported was in itself sufficient to constrain behaviour. More generally, 'Japanisation' extended into almost every area of daily life, imposing discipline through broad policies as well as the imposition of rules for the minutiae of life. Two aspects of this more indirect use of power had direct consequences for the Convent – Japanese education policies and Japanese attitudes to religion.

Primary schools were allowed to reopen in April 1942, two months after Occupation, and timed to coincide with the newly imposed celebration of the Emperor's birthday.²⁰ It was a

¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁷ Brenda Yeoh and Kamalini Ramdas, "Remembering Darkness: Spectacle, Surveillance and the Spaces of Everyday Life," in *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore*, ed. Diana Wong and Patricia Pui Huen Lim (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), 160.

¹⁸ Yeoh and Ramdas, "Remembering Darkness": 172.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977), 201-203. For oral histories on this issue, see Cindy Chou, *Beyond the Empires: Memories Retold* (Singapore National Heritage Board, 1995), 14-15.

²⁰ Ng Suan Kee Judy, "Shinto and Christian Festivals: An Analysis of the Japanese Religious Policy in Wartime Singapore" (Unpublished thesis, National University of Singapore, 2004), 29.

requirement of the Japanese administration that names of schools be changed to reflect their location, and so the CHIJ school became the Victoria Street Girls' School, reopening with about 200 students.²¹ Recognising that education was a powerful tool for propaganda and change, the Japanese took over direct control of the English, Malay and Chinese schools, and also established some Indian 'national' schools, which, according to Constance Turnbull, were used mainly to push propaganda about the Indian independence movement.²² Chinese schools were initially to be abolished, although they later reopened and, because of the shortage of teachers of Japanese, were able to teach in the Chinese dialects. Secondary schools were restricted to a minimum number of, primarily, agricultural or technical schools, and universities or colleges were closed except as required for 'technical training'.²³ Educational historian H.E. Wilson, has argued that the Japanese rush to reopen schools was partly to restore order and get young people off the streets, as well as a political push to use separate Indian schools to promote Indian independence.²⁴ This meant, in effect, a continuation of the pre-war pattern of education with schools divided along ethno-linguistic lines, and, according to Wilson, 'a poor compromise that included few of the rational aspects of Japanese intentions whilst retaining most of the worst features of the old system'.

Schools were now required to emphasise character building, physical training and vocational instruction and to teach singing, gymnastics, drama, handicrafts, drawing, Japanese and composition. At the daily morning assemblies, children bowed to the Japanese flag, sang the Japanese national anthem and then participated in compulsory mass physical education drills, which lasted for half an hour and were broadcast over the radio. Gardening was compulsory too, since food supplies in Singapore were dwindling. In October 1942, the *Syonan Times* newspaper reported that 'every foot of vacant ground' in the Convent was being used to grow vegetables.²⁵ Five classes a day were spending one hour each on gardening, and once a week they ate the produce – long beans, tapioca, sweet potatoes, maize, spinach, tomatoes, cucumbers and yams. Bayly and Harper have described this period as 'life in the time of

²¹ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 106-107.

²² Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 209.

²³ H. E. Wilson, *Social Engineering in Singapore: Educational Policies and Social Change 1819-1972* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1978), 90.

²⁴ Wilson, *Social Engineering in Singapore*, 92-93.

²⁵ "French Convent Growing Own Vegetables", *Syonan Times*, 6 October 1942.

tapioca', a reference to the food shortages that left most people living on a monotonous diet of tapioca.²⁶

The new school curriculum did away with English – considered the 'enemy language' – and made learning Nippon-go (Japanese) compulsory. Teaching in Malay was permitted in Malay schools as it was regarded as the indigenous language.²⁷ For everyone else, however, this meant that teachers first had to learn Japanese themselves before they could teach it. The Sisters had Nippon-go lessons at the Convent three days a week, and two or three who showed some aptitude went on to more advanced classes at St Joseph's Institution (renamed the Bras Basah Road Boys' School) and at Victoria School.²⁸ Father O'Donovan, a Brother at SJI, wrote that 'what was learned in the afternoon was taught next morning in the classroom. It was a desperate struggle just to stay ahead of the students'.²⁹ For pupils, there were also daily Nippon-go lessons broadcast over the radio, and students were brought to a broadcasting station at Cathay Cinema once or twice a month to learn how to sing Japanese songs or to watch Japanese movies.³⁰

Despite such attempts to introduce the new education regime, the system faltered. Many schools had been damaged in the bombing or commandeered by the military, school equipment had been looted, there was a lack of skilled personnel and no appropriate textbooks.³¹ School attendance levels, in general, remained far lower than before the war despite all primary school fees and book costs being abolished in 1943: in 1939 there were 72,000 students at schools in Singapore, and only about 7,000 during the Occupation, a number that fell dramatically from 1944.³²

Religious sites were largely respected during the occupation, although sometimes taken over for various military purposes. In Penang, the Japanese Navy had taken over the Infant Jesus Convent (the same convent where Mother Mathilde had lived before her move to Singapore in 1854), converting one of the buildings into a suite of rooms for the Admiral and torturing

²⁶ Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, 327.

²⁷ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 209.

²⁸ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 107.

²⁹ Patricius O'Donovan, *Jungles are never neutral: war-time in Bahau: an extraordinary story of exile and survival: the diaries of Brother Patricius O'Donovan fsc* (Ipoh: Media Masters Publishing, 2008), 27.

³⁰ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 108-109.

³¹ Wilson, *Social Engineering in Singapore*, 91.

³² Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*, 300.

seventy-six prisoners of war from a sunken submarine in a small room near the convent kitchen.³³ In Singapore, the new Canossa Convent was about to be claimed by General Yamashita when a priest pleaded with the General (in French) and a compromise was reached, with the nuns being allowed to stay, but with the new school building being taken over by the Japanese.³⁴ At the CHIJ Convent, there were no serious attempts to commandeer the site. In fact the Japanese sent people made homeless by the bombing to the Convent, and so eventually one building was used to house refugees, one was a hostel for teachers, and one was used by the Japanese to store rice.³⁵

Orphans continued to be brought to the Convent throughout the Occupation, although, if possible, orphans under five years of age were fostered out by the Sisters to Christian Chinese families to help reduce numbers.³⁶ On 30 August 1942, the *Syonan Times* published an article headed 'Almost Every Day ... A Baby is Abandoned: Authorities provide free supply of milk to Convent baby home'.³⁷ It reported that over fifty babies a month were being brought to the Convent, and that in the previous year, about 600 orphans had been taken in. Perhaps surprisingly, given that the Japanese were responsible for the bombing destruction of Singapore, the article described the 'typical case' of Elizabeth, a five-year-old brought to the Convent the day after the surrender of Singapore. She had been found crying and covered in blood beside the road, near her parents who had been killed by an exploding shell. The article continued: 'But the tender care and attention of the Sisters of the Convent has now made her healthy and happy, though her little mind does not seem quite normal yet.' It also reported that the Nippon authorities had 'very kindly' solved the milk problem for the babies by providing free milk. The article concluded by stating that in the Convent 'several little ships have found a safe haven'.

Services at Christian churches continued regularly. St Josephs Church held a service for peace every Thursday evening, which was 'well attended by the Sisters from the Convent and a troop of girls in their boarding department'.³⁸ Christmas and Easter religious celebrations

³³ Dilys Yap, *The Convent Light Street: A History of a Community, a School and a Way of Life* (Penang, 2001), 49-51.

³⁴ Rudy Mosbergen, *In the Grip of a Crisis: The experiences of a teenager during the Japanese occupation of Singapore, 1942-45* (Singapore: Printed by Seng City Trading, 2007), 103-04.

³⁵ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 112.

³⁶ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 110.

³⁷ "Almost Every Day...a Baby Is Abandoned." *The Syonan Times*, 30 August 1942, 4.

³⁸ Mosbergen, *In the Grip of a Crisis*, 188.

were also allowed, although the Catholic midnight mass was not, with ‘transport considerations’ given by the Japanese authorities as the reason it could not proceed.³⁹ Despite tolerating the celebration of Christmas, the Japanese occupiers stressed that Christmas Day was also the day to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Emperor Taisho, as well as celebrating it as Hong Kong Liberation Day, the day that Japanese forces had taken Hong Kong in 1941.⁴⁰ The Japanese authorities also used Christmas Day 1942 to point out in newspaper articles that the British and Americans had failed to live up to Christ’s teachings and instead had oppressed their fellow men.⁴¹ Other religions also continued to hold services, but religious organisations, particularly Christian, were kept under surveillance, with spies attending services and sermons prohibited.⁴²

A pamphlet titled ‘Read this alone – and the war can be won’ issued to all Japanese troops, included a paragraph headed, ‘When using temples and mosques’, instructing that ‘you must do nothing to offend the religious susceptibilities of the deeply superstitious native population’, and that ‘it is best, if possible, to avoid using places of worship altogether’.⁴³ Newspaper articles also reinforced this message of religious tolerance. The *Syonan Times* of 6 September 1942, for example, said that ‘For religious broadmindedness, Nippon stands unsurpassed’.⁴⁴ Mamoru Shinozaki, the head of the welfare department, recollected that he had delivered stocks of rice to ‘temples and churches and other charitable organisations’.⁴⁵ He and top-ranking Japanese officers also later attended the funeral of Catholic Bishop Devals, who died after an accident in Bahau. Shinozaki later wrote, ‘I kissed the corner of his coffin because I had always held him in respect as a God-fearing man’.⁴⁶ Despite this, British Intelligence services considered that the Japanese tolerance of other religions was based on a belief that ultimately all local religions and gods would be incorporated into the Japanese

³⁹ “Syonan churches holding special Yuletide services”, *Syonan Times*, 21 December 1942. See also Chapter Four, ‘Christmas and Easter in Wartime Singapore’ in Ng, *Shinto and Christian Festivals*.

⁴⁰ Ng, *Shinto and Christian Festivals*, 50-51.

⁴¹ “Americans and British had failed to live up to Christ’s teachings”, *Syonan Times*, 25 December 1942, 2 and “Only by wiping out US British greed can world observe Merry Christmas”, *Syonan Times*, 25 December 1942. See also “Americans, British flaunting Christ’s teachings: ‘Striking Times’ editorial: Peace on Earth preached but not practiced”, *Syonan Shimbum*, 26 December 1944, 2.

⁴² Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 210.

⁴³ Masanobu Tsuji, *Singapore, The Japanese Version*, ed. H.V. Howe (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1960), Appendix 1, 328.

⁴⁴ “For religious broadmindedness, Nippon stands unsurpassed”, *Syonan Times*, 6 September 1942.

⁴⁵ Shinozaki, *Syonan – My Story*, 41.

⁴⁶ Shinozaki, *Syonan – My Story*, 91.

religious system –thus the construction in Singapore of a Shinto shrine to their war dead was interpreted as ‘part of the religious infiltration scheme’.⁴⁷

Race

While the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was envisaged as having political and economic goals, another important aim was ‘the rescue of Asia from white aggression, the restoration of Asia to the Asians’.⁴⁸ The ‘Read this alone’ pamphlet explained that the European colonisers had ‘sailed into the Far East as if it were their natural right, (and) terrorized and subjugated the culturally backward natives’, who had been ‘so completely crushed by so few white men’ because they were ‘lacking in any awareness of themselves as a group, as peoples of Asia’.⁴⁹

In this sense, the surrender of Singapore, in Turnbull’s opinion, was a missed opportunity for the Japanese to ‘strike a chord of sympathy in a divided and mixed community, united only in subjection to a British regime that had failed them’.⁵⁰ The shock surrender had damaged local confidence in the British and engendered in some a feeling of abandonment and resentment. As one Chinese resident, Low Nuang Ing, recalled:

The sense of being victims of a base desertion rankled in the minds of all of us. The memory of that unseemly stampeding from Penang still had its sting, of launches cleared of Asiatic women at the point of the bayonet, and of our chagrin and disgust when, going to the railway-station to meet relatives and friends, we saw no Asiatics in that wilderness of Europeans, whom the Government was receiving as if they were conquering heroes come.⁵¹

He recalled his hope at the time that the Japanese, as fellow Asians, might take a different approach, writing that ‘we were not ill-disposed towards them. On the contrary, we were anxious to see whatever good there was in them’.⁵²

The cautious optimism of potential Asian brotherhood was short-lived as it became clear that, just as the British had inscribed racial categories on the population, the Japanese world-view

⁴⁷ National Archives of Singapore, *Reflections & Memories of War Vol. 2: Syonan Years (1942 – 1945): Living beneath the Rising Sun* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2009), 136. See also Ng, *Shinto and Christian Festivals*, Chapter One.

⁴⁸ Tsuji, *Singapore, The Japanese Version*, Appendix 1, 304.

⁴⁹ Tsuji, *Singapore, The Japanese Version*, 302.

⁵⁰ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 199.

⁵¹ Low Nuang Ing, *When Singapore Was Syonan-to* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1973), 8.

⁵² Low Nuang Ing, *When Singapore Was Syonan-to*, 8.

also included a racial hierarchy. While Malays were considered to be the indigenous people of the area, Indians were encouraged to join the newly formed Indian National Army which would be trained to fight the British in India and so bring about Indian independence.⁵³ Both groups could be considered fellow Asians, but historical animosity towards China led to all Chinese males between the ages of eighteen and fifty years being ordered to report for registration within the first few days of Occupation, with perhaps 25,000 of them massacred in the fortnight of Operation *Sook Ching*, the ‘purge through cleansing’ of perceived anti-Japanese elements.⁵⁴ Just as under the British, Eurasians occupied an ambivalent position: those with direct European lineage were interned, but the rest were told to consider themselves Asians –and to forget feelings of racial superiority.⁵⁵

The desire to humiliate the British and to stamp out any local loyalty to them was manifested in the variety of ways in which the Japanese exercised imperial power. Everyone had to bow deeply to any Japanese soldier or risk being slapped or worse. The aim was ‘the breaking down of the habit and custom left behind by the haughty and cunning British’ and to instil a sense of Asian consciousness and pride.⁵⁶ Defeated British and Australian troops were made to sweep the streets after the surrender in order to humiliate them and to reduce their status in the eyes of the local population – the photograph (Figure 11) below shows Australian troops sweeping the streets in 1942 as a public spectacle.⁵⁷ Similarly, school students during the Occupation were required to sweep, dust and clean their schools to eliminate the ‘false pride’ of the English school system.⁵⁸

⁵³ See Stanley Tan, *The Liberation: Resisting the Rising Sun and a New Beginning*, vol. 3, Reflections and Memories of War (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2012), Chapter 1 for detailed information on the Indian National Army.

⁵⁴ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 198.

⁵⁵ Felicia Yap, "Eurasians in British Asia during the Second World War," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 21, no. 4 (2011): 492.

⁵⁶ *Syonan Times*, 25 February 1942.

⁵⁷ See photograph of Australian troops sweeping streets in 1942 (Imperial War Museum), reproduced in Edwin Hoyt, *Japan's War: The Great Pacific Conflict* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986).

⁵⁸ Lee, *The Syonan Years*, 182.

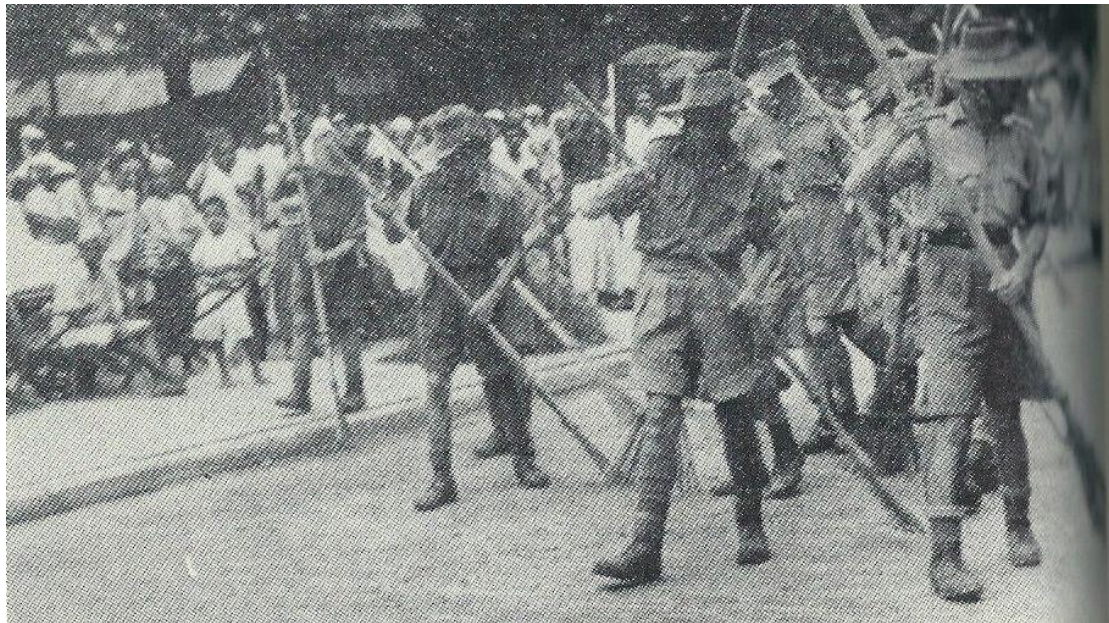


Figure 11 Defeated Australian troops sweeping streets while bystanders look on, 1942.

Source: Imperial War Museum

Yet, as I alluded to above, the espoused ‘Asian brotherhood’ was not a level playing field either. Some races were privileged over others, and the use of language such as ‘the culturally backward natives’ suggests a cultural superiority akin to that of which the British had been accused. The ‘Read this alone’ pamphlet also contained a section called ‘Treat the natives with kindness – but do not expect too much of them’.⁵⁹ Having stated that ‘we Japanese are brothers. At least we are indubitably relatives’, it went on to caution that many natives had become ‘tools of the white men, who spy for them, sell their blood-brothers, and betray Asia’. Furthermore:

countries of great natural blessings, where it is possible for men to live in nakedness and to eat without working, breed large populations of idlers. What is more, after centuries of subjection to Europe and exploitation by the Chinese, these natives have reached a point of almost complete emasculation. We may wish to make men of them again quickly, but we should not expect too much.⁶⁰

In this, we can see the familiar European trope of the ‘lazy native’. Raffles described the Malays as ‘indolent’, and Sir Frank Swettenham, Resident General of the Federated Malay States, wrote that the ‘leading characteristic of the Malay of every class’ was ‘a disinclination to work’.⁶¹ Historian Syed Alatas, writing about European colonialism in Southeast Asia,

⁵⁹ Tsuji, *Singapore, The Japanese Version*, 305-306.

⁶⁰ Tsuji, *Singapore, The Japanese Version*, 306.

⁶¹ Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 5.

argued that this image was an important element in the ideology of colonial capitalism and was a major justification used for territorial conquest.⁶²

In a similar way, the pamphlet cited liberation from colonial oppressors as the reason for Japan's involvement in the war – Japan would liberate the natives from oppression because 'the other peoples of the Far East look with envy upon Japan; they trust and honour the Japanese'.⁶³ Yet there was cynicism in the population about whether the Japanese were truly committed to an egalitarian Asian brotherhood, or instead to a Japanese domination of Asia (and elsewhere), given their need of rubber and tin for their war effort and their treatment of the Chinese population in particular. Japan scholar Ian Buruma has argued that key aspects of the Meiji policy of 'civilization and enlightenment' were contempt for the backwardness of other Asians, the idea that 'no serious nation could be without an empire', and a belief that colonial conquest was the 'ultimate sign of greatness and modernity'.⁶⁴

Gender

One of the most blatant intersections of power, race and gender was the organised procurement and management of 'comfort women' for the sexual use of troops. It is not my intention to go into detail about this matter, although attitudes of entitlement and racial superiority common to imperial projects applied here. We can see, in the two instances described below – where teenaged orphan girls in the care of the nuns were at risk of being taken for the sexual use of troops – that the nuns were aware of the sexualised nature of military conflict.⁶⁵

The first incident where the Convent girls needed protection from Japanese troops occurred not in Singapore, but in Seremban, Malaya. About ten days into the bombing of Singapore, the Reverend Mother decided to send most of the boarders and some of the orphans north to Seremban, a small town about forty miles south of Kuala Lumpur, where the Order had a

⁶² Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of colonial capitalism* (London: Frack Cass, 1977), 215.

⁶³ Tsuji, *Singapore, The Japanese Version*, 301.

⁶⁴ Ian Buruma, *Inventing Japan, 1853-1964* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 50-51.

⁶⁵ For a detailed analysis, see Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during World War II and the U.S. Occupation* (London: Routledge, 2002). Also, George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994).

Convent.⁶⁶ Maisie Duncan, a ten-year-old boarder at the time, was part of the group and recalled that Seremban was chosen because it seemed of little strategic importance to the Japanese, unlike Singapore –although this was to prove of limited protection, as in reality no place was able to provide a refuge from the Japanese imperialist push.⁶⁷ The older orphans were chosen to go so that they would be out of the way of Japanese soldiers who might prey upon them sexually.⁶⁸ The group departed by train, reached the Convent safely, and two weeks later the Singapore-based nuns returned, leaving the children in the care of the Seremban Sisters. Soon after, however, Japanese troops took the town. It was then that the girls found themselves in immediate danger, and the Sisters had to muster all the religious authority of their positions.

Duncan described the day that Japanese soldiers entered the Convent in search of ‘English women’ and, on finding none, tried to take some of the older orphans away to use as ‘comfort women’.⁶⁹ She recalled that a soldier pointed to the eighty or so orphans lying on mats on the floor, and said that as they were orphans that no one wanted, they would take them and give the nuns food in return. Risking their lives to protect the girls, the nuns replied that the Convent was a holy place, and then knelt down with their rosaries and crucifixes and started a prayer circle. The soldiers played a waiting game, setting up their cooking stoves on the veranda and waiting for the nuns to go to sleep. But when morning came the nuns were still praying, so the soldiers left empty-handed. Again endeavouring to use her religious and moral authority, the Reverend Mother, along with two Brothers, the parish priest and one of the Sisters, went to see the Japanese Military Governor, who spoke little English but whose aide could translate. She argued that it would be shameful if it were known that the Japanese army had defiled a Convent. She won her case and returned to the Convent with a scroll to hang on the gate, forbidding soldiers from entering without the Governor’s permission – those disobeying would be beheaded. A few days later, the Governor and his aide visited the Convent with a Japanese banknote for \$50 to buy cakes for the children.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Maisie Duncan, *A Cloistered War: Behind the Convent Walls During the Japanese Occupation* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2004), 16-17.

⁶⁷ Duncan, *A Cloistered War*, 17.

⁶⁸ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 110.

⁶⁹ Duncan, *A Cloistered War*, 78-80.

⁷⁰ Duncan, *A Cloistered War*, 80-83.

In her autobiography, Duncan speculated about the reasons for the Reverend Mother's success with the Military Governor.⁷¹ She suggested that while the use of the word 'shameful' may have helped ('face' being very important), it may also have been due to the longstanding role of the Infant Jesus Sisters in Japan and their links with the Imperial family. Mother St Mathilde Raclot, the Sister who started the Singapore Convent in 1854, also led the first group of Sisters to be sent to Japan in 1872.⁷² She opened orphanages and girls' schools in Yokohama and Toyko. By 1902 they were operating four orphanages with 868 children, but, as in Singapore, their opening of schools for girls played an important role, since in 1890 in Japan, only 30 per cent of girls had access to education and in 1895, 87 per cent of primary school teachers were men.⁷³ Significantly, the Sisters were sought out to give lessons at a school for girls of the nobility near the royal palace, and thereafter all Infant Jesus Convent schools in Japan bore the prestigious *Futaba* (two leaves) name.⁷⁴ Whether the Governor knew of this patronage is unknown, although seemingly possible. Or perhaps it was just, as Duncan reported the Governor saying at a later time: 'Prison, Convent – all same!'⁷⁵

A second incident occurred later in Singapore when Japanese troops entered the Convent chapel while mass was being held. The Bishop stopped the mass and told them there were no girls available as it was a religious building. Instead, the soldiers took the Convent's car and bus away. They returned later, again looking for girls, but were distracted by the Sisters who offered them lunch instead.⁷⁶ This and the other incident described above were potentially life threatening for the Sisters and the girls, and could easily have degenerated into violence. In a context in which civilians were required to bow deeply to any Japanese soldier they passed in the street and where loss of 'face' was shameful, the responses of the Sisters to demands for the girls demonstrated a measure of quick thinking and courage, and an effective use of what religious authority they could muster in the circumstances. They used what power and agency their role had given them, whether it was prayer, compassion or assertiveness. In the broadest sense, it was a political act.

⁷¹ Duncan, *A Cloistered War*, 83-4.

⁷² Ann Harrington, "The First Women Religious in Japan: Mother Saint Mathilde Raclot and the French Connection," *The Catholic Historical Review* 87, no. 4 (2001).

⁷³ Harrington, "The First Women Religious in Japan": 616 and 621.

⁷⁴ Duncan, *A Cloistered War*, 83-84. Duncan quotes from *Mother Mathilde's Call to Japan*, published by the St Maur International School in Japan in 2003.

⁷⁵ Duncan, *A Cloistered War*, 138.

⁷⁶ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 105-106.

Exodus to Bahau

Just months into the Occupation, food supplies in Singapore were dwindling. Even before the war, Singapore was dependent on the importation of food, due to its shortage of agricultural land and its historic development as a port-city. Initially, there was sufficient food left in pre-war stores, although the Japanese military administration seized all stocks of many essential items, such as rice, sugar, salt, flour and milk, and food was rationed. From March 1942, all refugees who were not from Singapore were ordered to return home or face ‘severe punishment’.⁷⁷ Very little food was able to be imported because of the allied attacks on shipping, and so a Grow More Food Campaign was implemented in August 1942.⁷⁸ This encouraged people to grow their own food, and every available piece of land was used, including the Padang. The Agricultural Department distributed seeds, allocated land for cultivation and established model market gardens, while garden competitions were organised and small loans were given out. Working hours were changed to enable people to tend their crops, and gardening became part of the school curriculum.⁷⁹

Some people, though, could not grow enough food for themselves, and buying food on the black market was expensive and dangerous. Prices of food continued to rise due to scarcity and currency devaluation – 500 grams of rice, for example, was six cents in December 1941, \$2.50 in December 1943, \$8.20 in December 1944 and \$75 in August 1945.⁸⁰ By 1944, with food supplies becoming critical, non-cooperation in the self-sufficiency campaigns was regarded as sabotage, and government employees were forced to work on vegetable plots.⁸¹

In August 1943, with the food situation dire and discontent widespread, the military administration sought to dramatically reduce Singapore’s population of one million, by 300,000 people.⁸² Responsibility for this was given to Shinozaki, who, fearing that force would otherwise be used, successfully proposed that people should be persuaded to leave by

⁷⁷ Lee, *The Syonan Years*, 164.

⁷⁸ National Archives of Singapore, *Syonan Years*, 246.

⁷⁹ Wong Hong Suen, *Wartime Kitchen: Food and Eating in Singapore 1942-1950* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet & National Museum of Singapore, 2009), 21.

⁸⁰ Jim Baker, *Crossroads: A Popular History of Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1999), 227.

⁸¹ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 208.

⁸² Shinozaki, *Syonan – My Story*, 79-80.

establishing small farming communities in Malaya.⁸³ The two best known were at Endau, settled by members of the Overseas Chinese Association (OCA), and Bahau (also known as Fuji village or Fuji-Go), settled by Catholics. Another seventeen lesser-known communities in six Malayan states were also established.⁸⁴

Shinozaki had approached Bishop Devals to consider relocating members of the Catholic community to a new farming settlement in Malaya. An advance party was formed to investigate potential sites for a farming community, and Bahau, in Negri Sembilan, was chosen despite reservations about the suitability of the site. Unlike the settlement established by the OCA at Endau, the Bahau site was surrounded by dense jungle, the land had not been properly cleared, the soil was poor and malaria was rife. The OCA had raised one million dollars for their project, the Japanese allowed the settlement to be self-governing, and they were provided with food until they were self-sufficient.⁸⁵ The Bahau settlement had no such arrangements with the Japanese and no significant financial buffer of its own.

The hastiness of the Bishop's agreement to the location, and by individuals to go to Bahau, may have been accelerated by a tightening, from September 1943, of Kempeitai surveillance on Eurasians, making getting out of Singapore more attractive.⁸⁶ The Kempeitai headquarters in the former YMCA building 'cast shadows across the entire city' and led to a widespread feeling of surveillance and fear. There was a system of auxiliary police: a 'one-star' man, in charge of a neighbourhood of around thirty households, reported to a 'two-star' man in charge of a district, who reported to a 'three-star' man who answered to the Kempeitai.⁸⁷ There was suspicion, too, of Japanese motives in establishing the farming settlements. Rudy Mosbergen, who helped his father in the Bahau liaison office, saw it as a strategic move by the Japanese who were warning that Singapore could become a battleground again, and so the evacuation of civilians, 'especially unpatriotic ones like Chinese and Eurasians, from any future theatre of fighting was a safety precaution that made good strategic sense'.⁸⁸ One of the settlers wrote:

⁸³ Shinozaki, *Syonan – My Story*, 80.

⁸⁴ Lee, *The Syonan Years*, p. 164.

⁸⁵ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 215.

⁸⁶ National Archives of Singapore, *Syonan Years*, 278-279.

⁸⁷ Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*, 311-312.

⁸⁸ Mosbergen, *In the Grip of a Crisis*, 198.

we were unconvinced and very suspicious. What assurance had we that these colonies were real sanctuaries and not concentration camps for irreconcilable elements, of which the Japs could make a holocaust at the giving of a pre-arranged signal?’⁸⁹

Yet, many did see the settlement as a way out. One of the De La Salle brothers, Brother Patricius, wrote that ‘for those of us no longer able to teach, and with no land to cultivate, this was great news indeed, not to mention the prospect of getting away from the oppressive presence of the Japanese’.⁹⁰ Others had been tipped off that the Kempeitai, who had been rounding up individuals for some time for questioning and torture, was about to arrest them. Bishop Devals feared that if there were to be an allied counter-attack on Singapore, the city would be in ruins, thus it would be safer to move his parishioners out of harm’s way.⁹¹

The first party of settlers to Bahau, which included the Bishop and the Brothers, left Singapore on 28 December 1943. Eventually three thousand or so settlers from Singapore, predominantly Catholic, went to Bahau, including Bishop Devals, two priests and six De La Salle Brothers. It also included a large number of nuns and orphans: about forty Sisters and 120 orphans from CHIJ, six or seven nuns and about 100 orphans from the Canossian Convent, and four nuns and about fifty orphans from the Good Shepherd Convent.⁹² The settlers had been promised much; as one settler wrote, ‘we thought we (were) going to the Garden of Eden but it was a Garden of Hell’.⁹³

The drawing below (Figure 12) by one of the settlers, Dr Van Cuylenburg, shows the layout of Mukim VI, the section of the settlement that housed the Eurasian settlers.⁹⁴ In Chapter Two, I explored how race had been a factor in Singapore’s development from the beginning of European settlement. In the Bahau settlement, Bishop Devals created two administrative areas or ‘mukims’ and a sub-area: Mukim VI was the administrative centre and the area where the Eurasian Catholics would live; Mukim V was for Chinese Catholics; and the sub-

⁸⁹ Low Nuang Ing, *When Singapore Was Syonan-to*: 124.

⁹⁰ O’Donovan, *Jungles are never neutral*, 29.

⁹¹ Francis Brown, *Memories of SJI: Reminiscences of Old Boys and Past Teachers of St. Joseph’s Institution, Singapore* (Singapore: SJI, 1987), 38. For another autobiography of the Bahau settlement, see J.F. Conceicao, *Flavours of Change: Destiny & Diplomacy. Recollections of a Singapore Ambassador* (Singapore: Horizon Books, 2004), Chapters 18-24.

⁹² Fiona Hodgkins, *From Syonan to Fuji-Go: The Story of the Catholic Settlement of Bahau in WWII Malaya* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2014), 57-65.

⁹³ Lee, *The Syonan Years*, 169, quoting Mr Benedict de Souza.

⁹⁴ Jock Oehlers, *That’s How It Goes: Autobiography of a Singapore Eurasian* (Singapore: Select Books, 2008), photo section. Sketch drawn by his father-in-law, Dr J.B. Cuylenburg.

area was for non-Catholics and neutrals. The Bishop was, consciously or not, following the Singaporean town-planning model of different residential areas for different ethnic groups first established by Raffles. So, even in the jungle, race was still a factor.

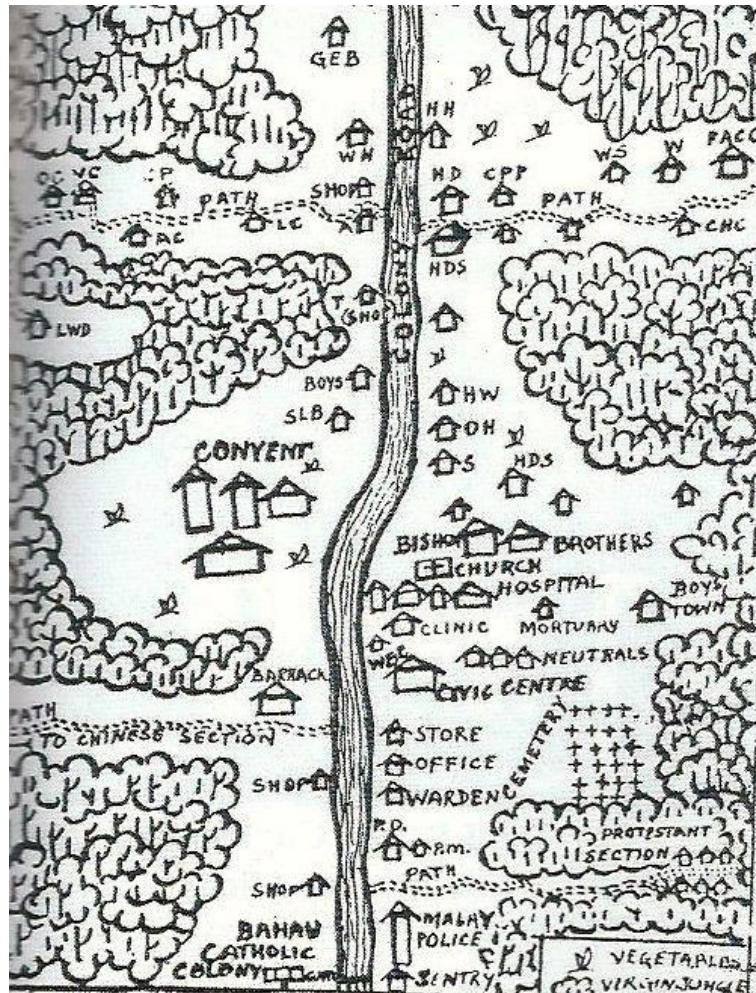


Figure 12: Sketch of Bahau settlement (Mukim VI). Drawn by Dr J. B. Cuylenburg.

We can see the sentry post at the entrance. Passes could be issued, but nonetheless, as Van Cuylenburg wrote, ‘there was no gainsaying the fact that we were internees’.⁹⁵ The distance from the entrance to the paths near the top was about one mile, and the path in the bottom left led through the jungle to the section for Chinese Catholics about three miles away (and where the Canossian Sisters lived with another group of orphans).⁹⁶ The Convent can be seen on the left, opposite the church where mass was held daily, and near the huts of the Bishop and the Brothers. It eventually comprised one long building as a dormitory for the orphans, another

⁹⁵ John Van Cuylenburg, *Singapore: Through Sunshine and Shadow* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1982), 215.

⁹⁶ Oehlers, *That's How It Goes*, notations accompanying sketch. For discussion of the Canossians, see Hodkins, *From Syonan to Fuji-Go*, 58-60.

for the refectory and common room, a third for the nuns, an infirmary, and a storeroom to keep food safe from animals.⁹⁷ The Good Shepherd nuns and the orphans in their care lived nearby. The school where the IJ nuns and the brothers taught Japanese and simple arithmetic is not marked, but 300 children attended initially. The numbers lessened, though, as children grew sick or died or were kept at home to help with domestic chores.⁹⁸

The hospital can be seen in this same central area, although there was no practising doctor on site. Just why Dr Van Cuylenberg was asked not to practice at Bahau is unclear, although his son-in-law Jock Oehlers believed it was because the Bishop thought that this would be a bad example to others as the doctor was a divorcee who had remarried.⁹⁹ The drawing also shows the huts of the ‘neutrals’, as well as the separate area for Protestants. Huts of other individual families are marked with their initials. We can also see a number of small shops selling whatever could be found to sell. Although the sketch is not drawn to scale, it shows a substantial cemetery, as the death rate among settlers was very high, commonly from malaria or disorders caused by malnutrition. Note also the close proximity of the ‘virgin jungle’, from which tigers and elephants would sometimes emerge to terrify the settlers.

Incongruously, in this struggling village of *attap* huts, there were two pianos. One belonged to the Convent Sisters, and its arrival in the settlement had been keenly anticipated by them. One of the nuns, Sister Anna, wrote that ‘we welcomed the arrival of the piano like a VIP (perhaps Very Important Piano)’.¹⁰⁰ With the piano, Sister Anna could give music lessons to the children and ‘make the Sisters sing songs like, When Irish eyes are smiling’.¹⁰¹ Another settler, Brother Patricius, wrote of the ‘daily anguish as we saw the emaciated orphan girls trudging along to class’, yet ‘the merry tinkle of the piano ringing across the settlement was, in the face of hunger and despair, a mellow reminder of (the Sisters’) devotion and indomitable dedication to those children’.¹⁰² The other piano in the settlement belonged to the Van Cuylenburgs, who had brought with them a range of items that they thought would be useful in their new lives: mattresses, food, gardening tools, medicines and the piano,

⁹⁷ Hodkins, *From Syonan to Fuji-Go*, 61.

⁹⁸ Rodziah Haji Sha’ari, *Japanese Resettlement Schemes: Endau and Bahau, 1942-1945*, Unpublished thesis History (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 1986), 66.

⁹⁹ Lee, *The Syonan Years*, 171.

¹⁰⁰ From unpublished memoirs, quoted in Mosbergen, *In the Grip of a Crisis*, 222.

¹⁰¹ From unpublished memoirs, quoted in Mosbergen, *In the Grip of a Crisis*, 222.

¹⁰² O’Donovan, *Jungles are never neutral*, 49.

which had to be carried the last two miles because the road was so muddy.¹⁰³ Despite these difficulties, they had taken the piano to Bahau because they felt that it could ‘keep up morale’.¹⁰⁴

The pianos operated as attempts to recreate a familiar home life in the new setting, to retain as much reassuring ‘normality’ as possible in a very abnormal situation. They are also a reminder that in times of great crisis and change, we consciously or unconsciously search out the familiar – for reassurance, for the sense that we still have some measure of control over our lives, or simply because, even in wartime, some aspects of life go on. In the same vein, amidst the hardship of life in Bahau, settlers organised concerts and dances. Mosbergen recalled that some settlers built a hut with a dance floor and danced to gramophone renditions of popular songs.¹⁰⁵ There were two sets of objections to the dances, however: from the clergy, because the dancers were too tired to attend mass the next morning, and from the Japanese security officers, who considered Western ballroom dancing to be decadent.¹⁰⁶

Japanese attitudes to the piano and dancing can be seen as symptomatic of their country’s ambivalence about modernity and the West. After centuries of isolation, the Meiji emperor, from the 1880s, sought to show the West that Japan was becoming a modern nation, which should be taken seriously as an emerging power. Barbara Andaya has written about the conflation of ‘modernity’ and ‘Western’, a ‘European appropriation of modernity’, as western clothing and furniture were embraced and Japan sought to gain a place of influence in the modern world.¹⁰⁷ In this ‘cultural mimicry’, as Buruma called it, material culture mattered and the piano would have had an important part of any ‘modern’ Japanese parlour.¹⁰⁸ Van Cuylenburg recalled in his autobiography that Japanese officers would frequently come to his home in Singapore during the occupation to listen to his wife play the piano, and that they wanted to buy the piano when the family relocated to Bahau.¹⁰⁹ Despite the piano not being a traditional Japanese instrument, each school operating in Singapore during the Occupation

¹⁰³ Van Cuylenburg, *Singapore: Through Sunshine and Shadow*, 212.

¹⁰⁴ Van Cuylenburg, *Singapore: Through Sunshine and Shadow*, 213.

¹⁰⁵ Mosbergen, *In the Grip of a Crisis*, 218.

¹⁰⁶ Mosbergen, *In the Grip of a Crisis*, 218.

¹⁰⁷ Barbara Andaya, "Historicising "Modernity" in Southeast Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40, no. 4 (1997): 405.

¹⁰⁸ Buruma, *Inventing Japan*, 51.

¹⁰⁹ Van Cuylenburg, *Singapore: Through Sunshine and Shadow*, 151 and 212-213.

was given a piano so that it could be used to teach the children Japanese songs.¹¹⁰ Yet, even after the reforms of the Meiji Restoration, Japan was still unable to gain acceptance in the Western 'club' as an equal among the major imperial powers. This disappointment led to an antagonism towards the West and a purging of 'everything Japanese liberals since the Meiji restoration had admired and tried to emulate'.¹¹¹ This antagonism was ramped up by anti-European propaganda campaigns at the outset of Japan's involvement in the war.¹¹²

Conditions in the Bahau settlement were extremely difficult for the Sisters and the children in their care. They ploughed, made their own implements, grew breadfruit, tomatoes, groundnuts, sweet potatoes, beans and tapioca, and 'thanks to good management they were the proud owners of a solitary but well-fed pig'.¹¹³ Despite such efforts, though, they often did not have enough food and the health of the Sisters and of the children deteriorated under these conditions. Many of the Sisters contracted malaria, despite being well covered up by their black habits, and often only one or two were well enough to care for the children.¹¹⁴ Van Cuylenburg was distressed by the state of the children:

It was pitiful watching the little children of the Convents suffering as they did. Their little stomachs could hardly tolerate their staple article of diet, tapioca. Milk in any form was unobtainable and all tinned foods for children were exhausted after Christmas 1944. Intractable diarrhoea, an off and on complaint with the little ones, was probably due to acute tapioca poisoning, and nothing could be done in these cases.¹¹⁵

The children were particularly vulnerable to malaria, exacerbated by their poor diet and 'many...were destined to die in Bahau'.¹¹⁶ The De La Salle Brothers helped to make their coffins, and on some days there were up to three funerals a day.¹¹⁷

The harsh lifestyle at Bahau was not reported in the Singapore press; instead, the settlement was used for propaganda purposes and a rosy picture was painted. On 15 January 1944, the *Syonan Shimbun* published an article headed 'Eurasians – Bahau calling!', which called for volunteer settlers and claimed that 'never has any community, in any country, been made

¹¹⁰ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 108.

¹¹¹ Buruma, *Inventing Japan*, 91.

¹¹² Hoyt, *Japan's War*, 244.

¹¹³ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 115–116 and O'Donovan, *Jungles are never neutral*, 79.

¹¹⁴ O'Donovan, *Jungles are never neutral*, 47.

¹¹⁵ Van Cuylenburg, *Singapore: Through Sunshine and Shadow*, 234.

¹¹⁶ O'Donovan, *Jungles are never neutral*, 34.

¹¹⁷ Hedwig Alfred, *Living the Mission: The SJI Story (1852-2002)* (Singapore: St Joseph's Institution, 2002), 63.

such an offer'.¹¹⁸ On 25 March 1944 it again reported enthusiastically on progress at Bahau in an article headlined 'Fuji – 'The Incomparable' – Village Visited'.¹¹⁹ It reported that the inspection party was fully convinced of the settlement's future success and that the settlers were 'displaying fine Spirit, not one anxious to return to Syonan. Significantly, it reported that the settlement was 'nestling in invigorating surroundings' with 'food seen to be plentiful'.

For the settlers, though, the majority described it as a 'debacle'¹²⁰ or a 'hideous deception'.¹²¹ They had been spared the daily perils of life in occupied Singapore and the dangers of bombing by the liberating forces, as well as largely being left alone by the Japanese. Nonetheless, in March 1945, with the war going badly for the Japanese, about eighty settlers, including Sister Alphonsus of the Good Shepherd order (who was considered British, although born in Ireland), were rounded up and interned in the Sime Road Camp in Singapore – where, ironically, they 'lived in better conditions than at Bahau'.¹²² The settlers had also largely been left alone by the Malayan People's Anti Japanese Army (MPAJA), although they were sighted by the settlers from time to time, and one settler, Sonya Miller, recalled that they would bring their guitars and play alongside the settlement musicians.¹²³

By the time liberation came in mid-August 1945, many settlers were near starvation, and between 300 and 1500 had died of disease, malnutrition and a range of other mishaps.¹²⁴ The Japanese guards left, and Miller recalls that the nuns (their Order not specified) who had courageously been hiding a large Union Jack the whole time, hoisted the flag to the cheering of the settlers.¹²⁵ Nonetheless, the Bahau experience had taken a heavy toll: Van Cuylenburg wrote that when the Gurkha regiment marched in to the settlement on 18 September 1945, 'the Convent children were there in force, but what a sad sight they made! Some could not stand; others who could, exhibited legs of skin and bone'.¹²⁶

¹¹⁸ "Eurasians - Bahau Calling!", *Syonan Shimbun*, 15 January 1944.

¹¹⁹ "Fuji – 'The Incomparable' – Village Visited", *Syonan Shimbun*, 25 March 1944.

¹²⁰ Mosbergen, *In the Grip of a Crisis*, 197.

¹²¹ Oehlers, *That's How It Goes*, Chapter 16 title.

¹²² Hodgkins, *From Syonan to Fuji-Go*, 29.

¹²³ David Miller, *Bahau, the Elephant and the Ham: A True Story of One Family's Struggle during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore* (Singapore: DM Books, 2014), 128-29.

¹²⁴ Lee, *The Syonan Years*, 171.

¹²⁵ Miller, *Bahau, the Elephant and the Ham*, 128.

¹²⁶ Van Cuylenburg, *Singapore: Through Sunshine and Shadow*, 248.

Aftermath: Return to normal?

After liberation, the Sisters and orphans in Bahau returned to Singapore, and the Convent commenced as best it could to return to 'normal'. Yet, as with the rest of the Singapore population, it was not easy. On a practical level, Convent buildings that had been damaged by the Japanese bombing had to be repaired. Despite organising fairs and flag days, however, money was harder to raise at a time when everyone was trying to rebuild and recover, and many had lost their savings when the Japanese 'banana' currency became worthless.¹²⁷ There was also the psychological trauma of the war years on the Sisters, the children and the community, which would take time to overcome.¹²⁸ In Singapore more widely, there were enormous problems to be tackled: infrastructure was damaged and the economy was in ruins; those who had been incarcerated during the occupation were being released but needed help; evacuees were returning; and there were significant social and health problems, as well as a shortage of food.¹²⁹ Communal feeding centres were run by the Department of Social Welfare from June 1946 to August 1948.¹³⁰

Schools reopened in the immediate post-war period but took some time to become fully functional again. Older teenagers had not been at school for over three years due to the closure of secondary schools during the Occupation, and consequently their return meant that classes had wide age gaps.¹³¹ At the Convent, five Sisters came out from Ireland to help re-establish classes, and in 1947 there were twenty-seven students in the graduating class.¹³² For the Sisters themselves, there were also changes taking place. The black habit and hood, originally based on that worn by widows in medieval France – thick, heavy and surely unsuited to the tropics – was replaced in the early 1950s by a black habit with a white headdress and, from the late 1960s, by an all-white habit.¹³³

A new identity

¹²⁷ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 117.

¹²⁸ Sister Damien Murphy, Oral History interview, Education in Singapore, National Archives Singapore, 1983, Accession no. 000245, Reel 14.

¹²⁹ Lee, *The Syonan Years*, 287.

¹³⁰ Ho Chi Tim, "Communal Feeding in Post-War Singapore," *Biblioasia* 9, no. 3 (2013). Also Colony of Singapore. *Annual Report*, 1946, 13.

¹³¹ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*: 65.

¹³² Information board, CHIJ Museum, Singapore.

¹³³ Information board, CHIJ Museum, Singapore.

On the broader level in the region, the power of the British Empire, in general, waned after the war as various colonies sought independence. The illusion of British invincibility had been shattered, and Britain had also lost its moral authority. Bayly and Harper have written that the whites-only evacuation of Penang marked ‘the moral collapse of British rule in Southeast Asia’.¹³⁴ In addition, as historians Barbara Andaya and Leonard Andaya have argued, the Occupation was significant in that the pan-Malayan organisations sponsored by the Japanese ‘promoted the idea of a larger and more unified Malaya that reached beyond individual state loyalties’.¹³⁵ While the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere did not eventuate under the Japanese, it had sown the seeds of ideas about a larger Asian region, and of an Asian ‘brotherhood’ that did not involve Europe. In a similar vein, Bayly and Harper pointed to the fact that the Allied South East Asia Command had ruled a vast area from 1944 to 1946, and that ‘this was the first time in history that the region was forged into a political unit’.¹³⁶ They went on to comment that ‘the wrenching of geography into new patterns was nothing compared with the dramatic change in people’s ideologies, attitudes and assumptions’.¹³⁷

Lee Kuan Yew, later recalling the war years and using them in the service of nation-building, wrote that he and his generation emerged from the war ‘determined that no one – neither the Japanese nor the British – had the right to push and kick us around ... the scales had fallen from our eyes and we saw for ourselves that the local people could run the country’.¹³⁸ In this statement, Lee is building the myths of common suffering and national awakening that later became an important foundation of the national story, as I analyse later in the chapter.

The standing of the British in Singapore had not been improved by the performance of the British Military Administration (BMA), which had charge of post-war reconstruction from September 1945 to March 1946. The British had been welcomed back as liberators, but soon ‘honeymoon bliss turned sour’, as recovery efforts were slow and inefficient and some British officials were noticeably dishonest and corrupt.¹³⁹ In addition, ‘the lingering shadow of the

¹³⁴ Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, 119.

¹³⁵ Barbara Andaya and Leonard Andaya, *A History of Malaya*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 259.

¹³⁶ Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 463.

¹³⁷ Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, 463.

¹³⁸ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Battle for Merger* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1961), 10-11.

¹³⁹ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 228.

Britisher's superiority continued to assert itself'.¹⁴⁰ Turnbull argued that in its seven months, the BMA destroyed the goodwill that existed at liberation and 'brought British prestige to an even lower point than in February 1942'.¹⁴¹ Yet, in 1945, in Bayly and Harper's words, '(British) imperialism was down but not out'.¹⁴²

To address the colonial fragmentation that it felt had contributed to the military debacle of 1941–42, and to forestall demands from the United States and China that it relinquish its colonies in Southeast Asia, Britain proposed a solution for Malaya: a new rationalised administration of a unitary state, the Malayan Union. Malay rulers would transfer sovereignty to the British Crown, the autonomy of individual states would be absorbed into the Union, and the privileges previously reserved for Malays would be available to all.¹⁴³ Opposition to the scheme led to its abandonment, however, and to the subsequent creation in 1947 of the Federation of Malaya; although, crucially, Singapore, because of its commercial and strategic importance to Britain, was not included in the Union and, instead, remained a British colony.

Many Singaporeans objected to their non-inclusion in the Malayan Union because they saw themselves as inherently part of Malaya – the PAP leaders viewed the separation as 'an artificial and temporary measure', and they vigorously campaigned for merger.¹⁴⁴ As the costs of Empire became increasingly regarded in Britain as a burden, self-government for Singapore was proposed – although, as Turnbull wrote, the Rendel Constitution of 1955, initiated by Britain, 'was designed to stimulate an appetite for self-government among seemingly reluctant Singaporeans'.¹⁴⁵ In 1959, after political campaigning and negotiation, Singapore was granted self-government. Shortly thereafter, in 1961, the Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, announced the idea of an expanded Federation of Malaya to include Singapore, North Borneo, Brunei and Sarawak. This had been broached on a number of previous occasions by the British and by local groups wanting a 'Greater Malaysia', but previously the Federation of Malaya had been wary of including Singapore because of concerns about upsetting the overall ethnic balance of any new entity, which would mean a majority of Chinese in the population and a corresponding minority of ethnic

¹⁴⁰ Chou, *Beyond the Empires*, 34. See also various oral histories 34–39.

¹⁴¹ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 229.

¹⁴² Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, 95.

¹⁴³ Virginia Hooker, *A Short History of Malaysia: Linking East and West* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2003), 187.

¹⁴⁴ Baker, *Crossroads*: 300.

¹⁴⁵ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 229.

Malays. There were also concerns of Singapore's economic interests clashing with those of Malaya, and a fear that Malayan politics might be radicalised by contact with Singapore's left-wing groups.¹⁴⁶

In August 1961, it was agreed that Malaya and Singapore should merge, and the Federation of Malaysia, made up of Sabah, Sarawak, the Malay Peninsula and Singapore, was declared in August 1963. Singapore's merger with Malaya has been called 'the triumph of hope over reality', since 'the aggressive leaders of the PAP and Singapore's 75 per cent Chinese population were bound to cause problems in a society obsessed with race'.¹⁴⁷ The Malay unease about racial imbalance was exacerbated by the violent race riots between Malays and Chinese in Singapore in July and September 1964.¹⁴⁸ This culminated in the abrupt expulsion of Singapore from the new Federation of Malaysia in August 1965 in what has come to be known as a 'moment of anguish'.¹⁴⁹ The sudden turn of events raised urgent issues of national identity, as expressed by Lee Kuan Yew at the time:

We ask ourselves, what is a Singaporean? In the first place, we did not want to be Singaporeans. We wanted to be Malaysians. Then the idea was extended and we decided to become Malaysians. But twenty-three months of Malaysia - a traumatic experience for all parties in Malaysia - ended rather abruptly with our being Singaporeans.¹⁵⁰

This lack of a fixed 'national' identity or 'imagined political community' had been a feature of Singapore since settlement by the British East India Company. Sociologist Chua Beng Huat has argued that in the colonial period, 'Singaporean' as a political category did not exist: an inhabitant was either an alien or a British subject – even the local-born inhabitants 'had anchored their cultural orientation to imaginary homelands'.¹⁵¹ Singapore as a place was part of the larger 'Straits Settlements' and the even larger and more diffuse British Empire. For the Bahau settlers who had felt 'deported', their identity, at least in part, was tied up with Singapore itself, a place that, at the time, was not yet separately defined in geo-political terms.

¹⁴⁶ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaya*, 283.

¹⁴⁷ Baker, *Crossroads*, 323.

¹⁴⁸ Baker, *Crossroads*, 326.

¹⁴⁹ Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998).

¹⁵⁰ Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), 12.

¹⁵¹ Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), 101-02.

This dearth of a common identity can be contrasted with Malaya, which historian Anthony Milner has suggested we can think of in ‘civilisational terms’, with a ‘history of Malayness’.¹⁵² A uniquely Singaporean identity was unlikely in this complex history, complicated also by race and class issues and Singapore’s colonial status. It was widely believed, including by the United Nations Committee on Colonialism in 1962, that Singapore was not viable by itself.¹⁵³ The suddenly-independent Singapore became a nation in crisis, in search of a new identity.

Nation-building and history-making

At this point nation-building became urgent and imperative, and consequently was integrated in institution-building.¹⁵⁴ As post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha has argued, education is a site where the narration of nation takes place, and so education policy in Singapore played an important role in building the new nation.¹⁵⁵ Government policies of multiculturalism meant that all four official languages now had to be taught at schools, and with a national emphasis on industrialisation for economic development, fifty per cent of lower secondary students had to take technical studies as a subject. Despite these modifications to the curriculum, the CHIJ schools continued to have government support – they had always been multi-racial. English was seen as a ‘neutral’ language in the new multi-racial Singapore; and their traditional emphasis on moral education remained acceptable, even during the government’s much later 1990s campaign to promote ‘Asian values’.

Duara has argued that history is often pressed into the service of nations to reinforce national mythologies and ideologies.¹⁵⁶ Just as the Japanese had tried to mould institutions and minds into a new nation, Syonan-to, the new Singaporean government also used history narratives for nation-building purposes. Singapore does not have a violent anti-colonial struggle on which to draw for national myth-making, and in this absence, Phillip Holden has proposed that the years of the Japanese Occupation came to represent the time of suffering and privation when the nation was forged.¹⁵⁷ Historians Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack have argued that the period of Occupation was even more firmly harnessed to nation-building in

¹⁵² Milner, *The Malays*, 242.

¹⁵³ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 299.

¹⁵⁴ Hill and Lian, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship*, 2-3.

¹⁵⁵ Homi Bhabha, ed. *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁵⁶ Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*.

¹⁵⁷ Philip Holden, "Postcolonial desire: Placing Singapore," *Postcolonial Studies* 11, no. 3 (2008).

the late 1980s when the PAP became concerned that younger people who had not experienced war would not appreciate the continuing need for limits to democracy and press freedom – the ‘crisis’ was addressed by reinvigorating war commemoration to reinforce the importance of vigilance against potential threats.¹⁵⁸ In the national narrative, the Occupation is used to remind Singaporeans of past adversity and the tenuous nature of survival – effectively a time when the new nation was first imagined.

Historian Ernest Koh has suggested that national commemorations of war can be understood as examples of Hobsbawm’s ‘invented traditions’, which try to ‘construct social cohesion by underscoring various forms of homogeneity’.¹⁵⁹ So, in the Singapore context:

The memory of often racially specific instances of brutality ... has been replaced by a national memory of a unifying experience, where all ethnic groups suffered equally ... All in an effort to foster imaginary bonds between otherwise disparate ethnic communities and create new allegiances to the postcolonial nation-state. Resistance to the Japanese, regardless of actual motivation, has been rationalized through the rhetoric of patriotism to the imagined postcolonial state.¹⁶⁰

An example of this was the unveiling in February 1967 of the Civilian War Memorial. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce had proposed a Chinese-style memorial for the victims of the *sook ching*, but the newly elected PAP government, mindful of the race riots of 1964, was promoting a nation-building policy of multi-racialism.¹⁶¹ The final memorial, although built over the exhumed and reburied remains of thousands of *sook ching* victims, was built to commemorate *all* civilians killed during the war, with the four ‘races’ – Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian/Other – represented by the four pillars of the monument.

Lee Kuan Yew presented the monument as representing the ‘common suffering’ of the war years.¹⁶² In this way, the differing experiences during the Occupation have been subsumed in the construction of a national narrative of shared suffering. Blackburn and Hack have argued that this ‘single unifying myth of all races suffering together’ has resulted in the site’s core nature as a burial place of thousands of the mainly Chinese victims of the *sook ching*, being

¹⁵⁸ Blackburn and Hack, *War Memory*, 294.

¹⁵⁹ Ernest Koh, “A Diaspora at War: National and Transnational Narratives of Singapore’s Second World War,” in *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History*, ed. Loh Kah Seng and Liew Kai Khuan (Singapore: Ethos Books & Singapore Heritage Society, 2010), 243. Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

¹⁶⁰ Koh, “A Diaspora at War”, 243-244.

¹⁶¹ Blackburn and Hack, *War Memory*, 293. For a full description of the process, see Tan, *The Liberation: Resisting the Rising Sun and a New Beginning*, 3: 216-47.

¹⁶² Blackburn and Hack, *War Memory*, 293.

downplayed and its value as an emotional symbol of a specific massacre weakened.¹⁶³ In reality, the different ethnic groups experienced the war differently – in Blackburn and Hack’s analysis, ‘in terms of explanation as well as experience, it seemed that there was not one “Fall” and Occupation, but many’.¹⁶⁴

Nonetheless, Blackburn and Hack have also argued that ‘the war memory of the large Chinese population has been at the core of this national memory of common suffering, even if presented in a way that is stripped of most of its culturally specific elements’.¹⁶⁵ This has meant that the wartime experiences of some other groups have been sometimes unacknowledged. Rebecca Kenneison, in her family memoir, expressed her angst that the Eurasian community’s contribution to the war effort and its suffering under Occupation had been consistently ignored or misunderstood: ‘By our existence, we shred the edges of neat definitions, we complicate matters ... The existence of Eurasians is a confusing factor at a time of nation-building.’¹⁶⁶

From the late 1990s, there has been an increased emphasis in Singapore on commemorating or interpreting the World War Two experience, a focus that sociologist Diana Wong has argued is an exception to the general official indifference to war memory in the rest of Southeast Asia.¹⁶⁷ The Battle Box – an interpretive centre in the underground bunker on Fort Canning Hill, used as a British command centre – opened in 1997 on the 55th anniversary of the surrender of Singapore. The Changi Museum opened in 2001 on the 59th anniversary (replacing the previous 1988 museum), and the Memories at Old Ford Factory exhibition gallery at the actual site of the British surrender opened in 2006 on the 64th anniversary of the surrender. Significantly, the Reflections at Bukit Chandu interpretive centre opened on the 60th anniversary to specifically commemorate the Malay Regiment.

¹⁶³ Blackburn and Hack, *War Memory*, 336.

¹⁶⁴ Blackburn and Hack, *War Memory*, 4. For a discussion of the treatment of minorities in the region, see Paul Kratoska, ed. *Southeast Asian Minorities in the Wartime Japanese Empire* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

¹⁶⁵ Blackburn and Hack, *War Memory*, 340.

¹⁶⁶ Rebecca Kenneison, *Playing for Malaya: A Eurasian Family in the Pacific War* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), 212.

¹⁶⁷ Diana Wong, "Memory Suppression and Memory Production: The Japanese Occupation of Singapore," in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, ed. T. Fujitani, Geoffrey White, and Lisa Yoneyama (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 219.

A permanent exhibition established by the Eurasian Association of Singapore, opened by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and titled 'World War II: The Eurasian Story', integrates the Eurasian experience into the generalised national theme of wartime suffering.¹⁶⁸ The Bahau Camp, portrayed in a large-scale model and in oral histories, '[fits] well into the theme of suffering'.¹⁶⁹ The portrayal of Bahau as a 'camp' is reminiscent of how the voluntary departure to Bahau is often described as 'deportation', as in Meyer's book on the Convent, and by a guide on a recent walking tour of the Convent.¹⁷⁰ Perhaps this is because it effectively *functioned as* a camp to its residents, who had to obtain a pass to leave it – certainly many have described it in that way – but it would also seem now to be redrawn in this way into the story of wartime suffering, memory and nation-building.

In a further use of war memories to reinforce social cohesion, the National Museum of Singapore, in 2009, published *Wartime Kitchen: Food and Eating in Singapore 1942–1950*, covering the three years of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore and the post-liberation recovery.¹⁷¹ The book was followed in 2013 by a six-part documentary DVD series, *Eat to Live: Wartime Recipes*.¹⁷² Each video is approximately twenty minutes long and comprised of newsreel footage, interviews with survivors and commentary from Singaporean academic Vineeta Sinha.¹⁷³ Each also features a chef recreating and updating a dish from the time, the food in effect acting as a bridge between past and present.¹⁷⁴ The documentaries remind the viewer of what was eaten then, and suggest that they could recreate the meal themselves, making the past seem more real and relevant to their own lives today.

The *Wartime Kitchen* book and DVDs extend the survival narrative by portraying the difficulties for ordinary Singaporeans of finding enough food to eat during the Occupation and its aftermath. Food shortages affected everyone to varying degrees, and the focus is on this shared hardship and the overcoming of it through being resourceful. Remembering the food shortages of the Occupation thus serves another nation-building purpose. The first video

¹⁶⁸ Blackburn and Hack, *War Memory*, 322–323. See also www.eurasians.org.sg, (accessed 6 March 2012) for details of the ongoing exhibition.

¹⁶⁹ Blackburn and Hack, *War Memory*, 324.

¹⁷⁰ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 61. Also Preservation of Monuments Board, Monuments Open House 2012, walking tour: Those Catholic School Days, November 2012.

¹⁷¹ Wong Hong Suen, *Wartime Kitchen: Food and Eating in Singapore 1942–1950*.

¹⁷² Gozde Zehnder and Russel Zehnder, *Eat to Live: Wartime Recipes*, (Singapore: Objectifsfilms, 2013).

¹⁷³ Associate Professor Vineeta Sinha, National University of Singapore.

¹⁷⁴ Christopher Tan Yu Wei.

in the series concluded by asking ‘What is it like to ache and long for food? Today we simply don’t know what hunger is’. Here, it is being used to show the success of the state today. The food scarcity of the war years stands in contrast to the excessive contemporary consumption of Singaporeans today. In the successful and affluent nation today, food is again plentiful; Singaporeans love to eat out and to discuss food, and shopping has been described as a national pastime.¹⁷⁵ The documentaries remind Singaporeans that life was not always so good – and thus highlight the competence of the PAP. The last video in the series reinforces the need for citizens to be disciplined and to safeguard their success. It concludes with the words:

As these stories trickle down, we realise that it takes more than food to survive in adverse times. From the war survivors we learn that it is blind hope and sheer willpower that sustained them.

This reinforces the narrative of the vulnerability of Singapore because of its small physical size and the subtext that survival depends on the willpower and ‘soft authoritarianism’ of the government. Channel News Asia, a Singaporean television station, recently produced a television program, *Wartime Singapore*, described as a ‘historical reality documentary that takes a Singaporean family back in time’ to see how they would cope with the anxieties and food shortages of the Occupation years.¹⁷⁶ This suggests again that the period of food scarcity during the Japanese Occupation was a moment that continues to resonate today – and continues to be used in the service of the nation.

Conclusion

During World War Two, the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus survived bombing, incursions by Japanese troops, changes in education policies, food shortages and the general danger and uncertainty of life under occupation. The Sisters were proved to be women of courage and dedication who used their role and religious authority as best they could in the circumstances to protect the children and adults in their care. They endured the dangers and difficulties of the war years and shared in the traumatic events that affected all Singaporeans. Similarly, after liberation, they, too, had to rebuild and adapt to a changed world.

¹⁷⁵ Goh Chok Tong, *National Day Speech*, Singapore, 9 August 1996 (Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1996), 2.

¹⁷⁶ Screened in March 2015. See <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/tv/tvshows/documentaries-specials/wartime-singapore/1752188.html>, accessed 11 July 2015.

The experience of the war and the occupation was drawn into the myth-making and history-making process of building the new nation. It has come to be seen as a time of common suffering and hardship when the shackles of colonialism were thrown off – effectively a time when the new nation was first imagined. As the PAP governments in the new nation have had to adapt to (and manufacture) ‘crises’ to consolidate a largely authoritarian regime, the Convent also had to adapt to survive. Singapore itself was changing and modernising at a rapid pace in the post-independence years and the Convent had to change along with this frenetic pace of development.

The building of the new nation of Singapore may not have been explicitly central to the life of the Convent – after all, as the notation on the 1920s photograph of the Convent says, ‘God is at the centre of everything’. As nuns, their ultimate allegiance was to God and the Catholic Church, and to a large extent this defined their identity. Yet, the Convent *was* affected by the larger social changes brought about by nation-building. As both educators and as carers of orphaned children, they were at the very least integrally involved in educating and raising the new generations of citizens of the new nation. By the 1980s, though, the government was considering urban redevelopment in the old colonial centre of town – and the Convent occupied prime space. The next chapter examines this post-colonial period of rapid transformation of the city and the Convent.

Chapter 5

The city renewed: 'No less than the gradual demolition of virtually all of the whole'

Introduction

Singapore's expulsion from the short-lived Federation of Malaysia in 1965 and its sudden emergence as a republic stirred immediate concerns about its economic viability. A political narrative emerged from the new government that Singapore's very survival was at stake due to uncertainty about whether it could stand alone as an independent nation.¹ The political priority was to develop a more diverse and sustainable economic base. Modernisation and economic development were prioritised, transforming the nation both physically and socially. In this chapter I show that the colonial legacy of urban planning acted as a template which the government drew on and developed, using existing planning principles and structures, as well as enlisting international expertise. I examine the push for urban redevelopment in those early years, particularly the emphasis on building the modern city at the initial expense of heritage buildings. I then examine the emerging interest in heritage conservation in the 1970s and 1980s.

Using the Convent as an example, the chapter reads societal priorities in the fabric of one building. It looks specifically at the most dramatic intervention of all for the Convent – the acquisition of the site by the government and the exodus of the Sisters and the Convent schools from the city centre to the suburbs. The process of urban redevelopment and the transport needs of the modernising city had overtaken the 1854 priorities of a Convent and girls' school in the centre of the town. The Convent had never previously been vacated, even during the upheaval of the Japanese Occupation. In a sense, one might say that its success was its eventual downfall, since it had grown over the years to occupy an entire city block in central Singapore. It was in a key civic and commercial position and also on the route of the new underground Mass Rapid Transport (MRT) system. In 1980, when planning for the MRT line began, the Convent site and its buildings were at risk of being compulsorily acquired and

¹ See Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998).

demolished to make way for the new transport system. To understand how things had come to this point, we need to look back on the preceding decades and the priorities and demands of nation-building.

From the colonial to the global city

Sociologist Anthony King has argued that former colonial cities had been primed to perform well as global cities, as they effectively operated as the forerunners of what the contemporary capitalist city would become.² This was the case with Singapore, founded as a port-city with free trade as its purpose. In Chapter Two I examined how Singapore was progressively planned and ordered by the British in the early years of the colony. Raffles's Town Plan of 1822 inscribed public order on the space of the town, designating areas for government buildings and for the different ethnic groups, and regulating the orientation of streets, size of houses and approved building materials. The architect George Coleman, appointed as Superintendent of Public Works in Singapore in 1833, made extensive use of Indian convict labour to reclaim land, drain marshes, construct roads and build houses and churches.³ This planned ordering of the island was a practical embodiment of the Enlightenment ideals of reason, knowledge and order. Imposing order on the landscape was a signifier of progress and civilisation.

British colonial cities often had remarkably similar planned central layouts and large civic buildings, as Public Works departments were established and personnel moved between various colonies.⁴ Before coming to Singapore, Coleman had worked in Calcutta and Java. Architects Jane Beamish and Jane Ferguson have remarked that 'one can almost be certain that every Coleman building in Singapore has a close relative in either Calcutta or Madras', since, like other colonial builders of the time, he drew on various architectural 'pattern

² Anthony King, *Global Cities: Post-Imperialism and the Internationalization of London* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 38.

³ J. F. A. McNair and W. D. Bayliss, *Prisoners Their Own Wardens: A Record of the Convict Prison at Singapore in the Straits Settlements Established 1825, Discontinued 1873, Together with a Cursory History of the Convict Establishments at Bencoolen, Penang and Malacca from the Year 1797* (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., 1899). For a detailed examination of intra-colonial penal transport, see Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), particularly 1-22.

⁴ See for example Peter Scriver, "Empire-Building and Thinking in the Public Works Department of British India," in *Colonial Modernities: Building, dwelling and architecture in British India and Ceylon*, ed. Peter Scriver and Vikramaditya Prakash (London & New York: Routledge, 2007).

books'.⁵ The imposing civic buildings of colonial cities made up the 'symbolic imperial square' of the warehouse, the fort, the palace and the church.⁶ While such buildings functioned to showcase the power of the empire, architecture historians Peter Scriver and Vikramaditya Prakash have written that

the building scene of colonial South Asia was not just a provincial theatre for the playing out of metropolitan ideas and fashions. It was a particularly distant stage on which representations of the modernity associated with the European core – no matter how stilted a caricature – could assume a self-important authenticity merely by contrast to local practice.⁷

Singapore was a smaller stage – although visited by many ship passengers in transit between Britain, Australia and India – but Scriver and Prakash's point nonetheless applies.

Historian Loh Kah Seng has suggested that 'the ideological distance between the British colonial regime and the PAP is not as great as portrayed in most scholarship', as both shared a 'high modernist' philosophy and a confidence in scientific and technical progress.⁸ The negotiated and planned move towards independence, first with self-government in 1959 and then merger as part of the new independent Federation of Malaysia, was quite a different process of de-colonisation than that of many former colonies. Frantz Fanon maintained that de-colonisation is *always and necessarily* violent and that the proof of its success lies in 'the whole social structure being changed from the bottom up'.⁹ He argued that when decolonisation occurs 'in areas which have not been sufficiently shaken by the struggle for liberation', the colonisers have simply been replaced by local elites who have internalised 'the manners and forms of thought picked up during their association with the colonialist bourgeoisie'.¹⁰ Fanon, had he lived to see the decolonisation of Singapore, may well have classified it in this latter way, since, in effect, the British elites were replaced by Chinese elites. The first Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, was educated in the English school system in Singapore and the United Kingdom, and, particularly in the early years, the

⁵ Jane Beamish and Jane Ferguson, *A History of Singapore Architecture: The Making of a City*, Revised ed. (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1989), 31.

⁶ Jan Morris, *Stones of Empire: The Buildings of the Raj* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 158.

⁷ Scriver and Prakash, *Colonial Modernities*, p. 5.

⁸ Loh Kah Seng, "Black Areas: Urban Kampongs and Power Relations in Post-War Singapore Historiography," *Sojourn* 22, no. 1 (2007): 2.

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington (London: Macgibbon and Fee, 1965. 1961), 29.

¹⁰ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 39.

majority of PAP leaders were English-educated.¹¹ Raffles has been monumentalised as the founding father of Singapore, becoming, as Phillip Holden has argued, the ‘metanarrative of Singapore’s national identity’.¹² The Raffles name has come to be associated with notions of quality and tradition, such as the prestigious Raffles Hotel, the Raffles Girls School and the former Raffles Class travel on Singapore Airlines.¹³ In this sense then, many colonial structures in Singapore – both physical and legal – have been kept in place or modified, rather than substituted.

Urban Planner Belinda Yuen has argued that the success of Singapore’s post-colonial urban planning can be traced back to the British colonial town-planning policies, which set in motion a practice of comprehensive long-term planning.¹⁴ The Singapore Improvement Trust, established in 1927, was a model already used in other parts of the empire as an alternative to democratic municipal councils, with the ability to undertake improvement schemes and control land subdivision.¹⁵ In 1936, the first public housing estate in Tiong Bahru was built, based on British New Town principles. Yet in 1947, despite the efforts of the Trust, high birthrates and immigration reflected in the Census Report showed that about a third of the population was living in about 1,000 acres in the centre of the city, with an average density of about 300 persons per acre, and with densities rising to 1,000 or more to the acre.¹⁶

Post-war reconstruction in British colonies generally meant that British planning was ‘actively exported’ across the empire.¹⁷ Systems for planning and controlling development were introduced, with master plans ‘reflecting the prevalent British town planning notions of growth containment and new town development’.¹⁸ The Singapore Master Plan, drawn up in 1955, and its subsequent implementation in 1958, governed the use of land for twenty

¹¹ C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819 - 2005*. 3rd ed. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 267.

¹² Philip Holden, "The Free Market's Second Coming; Monumentalising Raffles." Chap. 5 In *Reading Culture: Textual Practices in Singapore*, edited by Phyllis Chew and Anneliese Kramer-Dahl (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1999), 87.

¹³ Joan Henderson, "Understanding and using built heritage: Singapore's national monuments and conservation areas," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 17, no. 1 (2011): 58.

¹⁴ Belinda Yuen, "Urban Planning in Southeast Asia: Perspective from Singapore." *Town Planning Review* 82, no. 2 (2011), 152.

¹⁵ Robert Home, *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities*. 2nd ed. (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2013), 83-84.

¹⁶ See Housing and Development Board, *First Decade in Public Housing 1960-69* (Singapore: Housing & Development Board, 1970), 7.

¹⁷ Home, *Of Planting and Planning*, 208.

¹⁸ Yuen, "Urban Planning in Southeast Asia: Perspective from Singapore," 148.

years.¹⁹ For the first time, there was an island-wide land-use plan, with five-yearly reviews and a statutory requirement to obtain written planning permission for new projects.²⁰

Using this plan, the PAP sought to regulate and develop the urban space. It made use of, and built on, these existing colonial structures of urban planning and also benefited from the legacy of a sizable land bank of Crown Land, equivalent to a third of the total territory.²¹ The PAP envisaged a planned city of public housing estates, drawing on the British ‘new town’ model, with large, public high-rise housing estates, which would house workers near to industries and schools. This would help with unemployment, particularly in the construction industry, and it would show that the PAP kept its promises, thus generating voter loyalty.²² Sociologist Daniel Goh has argued that the British use of public housing was an ‘extension of benevolent paternalism to the colonies’, to ‘transform natives into modern citizens’.²³ Like the British colonial authorities, the PAP’s ordering of space was a tangible means of asserting authority on the landscape and on society – it demonstrated their ability to shape and control the nation and, thus, the society.

Yet in 1961, two years after the PAP gained power, 26 per cent of the population were still living in kampongs on the urban fringes, which were haphazard and built without planning controls.²⁴ This was not out of line with other Southeast Asian cities at the time: in 1961 such ‘informal settlers’ made up between a fifth and a quarter of the populations of Singapore, Manila, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta.²⁵ Nonetheless, the unplanned and chaotic nature of the urban squatter settlements was at odds with the PAP’s vision of an ordered modernity. Instead, as Loh has suggested, the kampongs were ‘an ambivalent zone, where the state felt its control to be tenuous’.²⁶ The unease about Communist agitation was still current, and the

¹⁹ Singapore, "Master Plan: Report of Survey," (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1955).

²⁰ Yuen, "Urban Planning in Southeast Asia", 152.

²¹ Rodolphe De Koninck, Julie Drolet, and Marc Girard. *Singapore: An Atlas of Perpetual Territorial Transformation* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 26. Later, another 10% of land used as British military bases became available when they closed down in 1968-71.

²² Diane Mauzy and R.S. Milne, *Singapore Politics Under the People's Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002), 90.

²³ Daniel Goh, "Between History and Heritage: Post-Colonialism, Globalisation, and the Remaking of Malacca, Penang and Singapore," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 2, no. 1 (2014): 95.

²⁴ Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 10.

²⁵ Loh Kah Seng, "Singapore in Southeast Asia: The fire and the experts," in *New Mandala* (8 July 2013). <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2013/07/08/singapore-in-southeast-asia-the-fire-and-the-experts/>, accessed 14 March 2014.

²⁶ Loh, *Squatters into Citizens*, 11.

Hock Lee Bus riots of 1955 and the Chinese Middle-School riot of 1956 were reminders of how quickly social unrest could spiral out of control. Loh has described this as a situation where ‘experts, states and informal settlers were locked in an irreconcilable conflict arising from two global events of the time: decolonization and the Cold War’.²⁷

The use of traditional and improvised materials in the squatter settlements also meant that fires could spread quickly. In Hong Kong, a 1953 fire in the Shek Kip Mei settlement had made 50,000 residents homeless.²⁸ The public concern in Hong Kong and in the British press led to a government rebuilding program that resettled all of the homeless in less than a year. Sociologists Manuel Castells, Goh Lee and Reginald Kwok have argued that the Hong Kong experience was influential in persuading the new PAP government to expand the pre-existing colonial public housing system.²⁹ This was dramatically demonstrated in 1961 when a fire swept through the Bukit Ho Swee area of Singapore leaving 16,000 homeless.³⁰ The need for urgent rehousing led to the first big project for the new Housing and Development Board (HDB) when emergency housing was built on the same site. Later, in 1967, the HDB reflected on the fire:

The story of Bukit Ho Swee is a familiar one of an insanitary, congested and dangerous squatter area which had a happy ending. The fire disaster was a blessing in disguise for all the occupants there. It is a far too familiar picture of an inert community who do not think of moving from their unpleasant and dangerous surroundings until a disaster makes the decision for them ... It also serves as a lesson for all living in such dangerous and appalling conditions to co-operate with the Government in helping to wipe out such living conditions ...³¹

Here we see the portrayal of the squatters as living in insanitary and dangerous conditions, an ‘inert community’ without the will or thought to better themselves. The fire is portrayed as a ‘blessing in disguise’. Reminiscent of literary scholar Geraldine Heng and journalist Janadas Devan’s concept of ‘state fatherhood’, the PAP is the benevolent father rescuing them from their own intransigence – but also the stern father warning that ‘it serves as a lesson for all’ to ‘co-operate with the Government’.³²

²⁷ Loh, "Singapore in Southeast Asia: The fire and the experts".

²⁸ Manuel Castells, Lee Goh, and Reginald Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome: Economic Development and Public Housing in Hong Kong and Singapore* (London: Pion, 1990), 1.

²⁹ Castells, Goh and Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome*, p.1.

³⁰ Loh, *Squatters into Citizens*, 1.

³¹ Housing and Development Board, *Bukit Ho Swee Estate* (Singapore: Singapore Government, 1967), 39.

³² Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore," in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker, et al. (NY & London: Routledge, 1992).

Loh argued that the ‘emergency’ was not the fire hazard or inadequate housing, but rather the PAP’s perceived ‘need to remake Singapore in the image of a sanitized and disciplined showcase state; it was an “emergency”, albeit politically expedient, that existed first and foremost in the PAP Government’s mind’.³³ Loh argued that the fire has been portrayed by the PAP as a blessing, which led to moving residents from the unsanitary to the modern.³⁴ It also fitted with their national narrative about the virtue of overcoming adversity – out of hardship and struggle comes something better. The fire and the government response became a formative episode in the later Singapore Story and effectively became a metaphor for the progress of Singapore under the PAP.³⁵ Loh also noted that there has been a cynicism and persistent ‘countermyth’ among some who were re-housed that the fire was deliberately set by the government to clear the ‘slum’ and thus allow for urban renewal projects.³⁶

Planning the new nation

Public housing, along with the Land Acquisition Act of 1966, was integral to the government’s goals of developing Singapore into a ‘modern’ city and it complemented the PAP’s industrialisation program. Yet social geographers Martin Perry, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh have contrasted Singapore’s priorities with other developing countries at the time, which tended to treat housing problems as something to be addressed *after* economic progress had been achieved – that is, wealth would gradually trickle down and produce improved housing conditions. In contrast, the Singaporean government regarded an improved living environment as the *prior* condition to economic success. While the former colonial government had built housing, the new PAP government had the political will to act decisively and to allocate significant resources – and to move in an almost authoritarian manner. Prime Minister Lee Yuan Yew expressed the PAP approach surprisingly explicitly in his 1968 National Day Rally speech when he said:

We wouldn’t be here, we would not have made economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters – who your neighbour is, how you live, the

³³ Loh. “Black Areas”, 12.

³⁴ Loh, *Squatters into Citizens*, 260 and 1.

³⁵ Loh, *Squatters into Citizens*, 244.

³⁶ Loh, *Squatters into Citizens*, 260. For example he quotes a fire victim who said “the government had great difficulty trying to evict the kampong residents, so if there was a fire, you had to move even if you were unwilling”, 176.

noise you make, how you spit or what language you use. We decide what is right.³⁷

Taming the landscape

While the colonial authorities had drained and reclaimed land, the PAP changed the very size and shape of Singapore itself. Over the years since independence, swamps and estuaries have been drained or filled in, new reservoirs have been created, and land has been reclaimed from the sea. In 1957, the total land area of Singapore was 581 sq kms. By 1980 it had increased to 617.8 sq kms; in 1990 to 633 sq kms, and in 2006 to 722.6 sq kms – a remarkable increase of almost 25 per cent.³⁸ In the civic centre the colonial grid has been maintained, but Beach Road is now a full three kilometres from the sea.³⁹ This expansion of territory continued the early colonial transformation of the land. Symbolically, too, it is reminiscent of the colonial ordering of territory and the continual extension of empire. In this case, the government showed that it had the power to change physical space, and that it could order the landscape by making it bigger. Architect Lilian Chee, noting that further planned land reclamation means that by 2050 over a third of the country ‘will rise out of the sea’, has argued that, in Singapore, ‘the concept of space and time is tied to a kind of unbounded utopianism – the will to create space that is idealised underlies all such enterprises’.⁴⁰

The new PAP government re-imagined Singapore as the ‘Garden City’. The inaugural Tree Planting Day in 1963 was followed in 1967 by a large-scale beautification program of parks and street-tree planting.⁴¹ The intent of the program was not solely to provide a more pleasant environment for citizens – it was part of a pragmatic strategy to attract foreign investment. Lee Kuan Yew has been explicit that ‘well-kept trees and gardens were a subtle way of convincing potential investors in the early crucial years that Singapore was an efficient and effective place’, and that ‘in wooing investors, even trees matter’.⁴²

³⁷ Lee Kuan Yew, speech, National Day Rally, August 1986. For a discussion of the ideological function of National Day speeches, see Kenneth Tan, "Singapore's National Day Rally Speech: A Site of Ideological Negotiation." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 37, no. 3 (2007): 292-308.

³⁸ De Koninck, Drolet, and Girard, *Singapore: An Atlas of Perpetual Territorial Transformation*, 14.

³⁹ De Koninck, Drolet, and Girard, *Singapore: An Atlas of Perpetual Territorial Transformation*, 24. See also maps of central Singapore in 1837 and 2005, p. 25.

⁴⁰ Lilian Chee, *Conserving Domesticity* (Novato, CA: Three Sixty Review, 2012), 011.

⁴¹ Belinda Yuen, "Creating the Garden City: the Singapore experience," *Urban Studies* 33, no. 6 (1996): 960-61.

⁴² Lee Kuan Yew, Speech on the 35th Anniversary of the Economic Development Board, 1 August 1996.

Remarkably, in what Yuen has described as ‘an interesting paradox’, in the period 1967 to 1982, the built-up area of Singapore expanded by 80 per cent, while land covered by forests and swamps or used for agriculture decreased by 30 to 40 per cent; yet, as a result of the Garden City policy, land allocated to open space and recreational use increased by 143 per cent.⁴³ Yuen has argued that the Garden City program ‘serves as a powerful national symbol’, a visible manifestation of the government’s efficacy and of the quality of life and level of development that the country has achieved.⁴⁴ This visible control of the landscape is reminiscent of the colonial establishment of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, which had showcased Enlightenment goals of progress demonstrated through classification and a taming of nature.⁴⁵ It demonstrated in a tangible way that the new PAP government could change Singapore’s ‘third world’ physicality and transform the very land and water itself.

Ordering society

As well as moulding the landscape, PAP governments embarked on planning and ordering the population and the urban space. Lee Kuan Yew has written that they had ‘one simple guiding principle for survival’ – Singapore ‘had to be more rugged, better organized, and more efficient than others in the region’, so that international companies would choose Singapore in which to invest.⁴⁶ With assistance from the United Nations Development Program, the PAP government introduced a 20-year Concept Plan in 1971.⁴⁷ This envisaged a ring of high-density new towns and industries, linked to each other, industries and the central business district by expressways and a mass rapid transport (MRT) system. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) was established in 1974, with the main tasks of urban planning and enabling economic development.⁴⁸

A focus on large-scale urban redevelopment in the central city area meant moving existing residents out to the suburbs, and providing affordable public housing in estates still within commuting distance of the centre. A series of laws, such as the Land Acquisitions Act (1966),

⁴³ Yuen, "Creating the Garden City", 956-957.

⁴⁴ Yuen, "Creating the Garden City", 969.

⁴⁵ Emma Reisz, "City as Garden: Shared Space in the Urban Botanic Gardens of Singapore and Malaysia, 1786-2000." Chap. 6 In *Postcolonial Urbanism: Southeast Asian Cities and Global Processes*, edited by Ryan Bishop, John Phillips and Wei-Wei Yeo. 123-50 (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁴⁶ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965 - 2000*: 58.

⁴⁷ Crooks Mitchell Peacock Stewart Pty Ltd, "The urban renewal & development project, Singapore Surveys & analysis for the United Nations Development Programme (Special Fund)," (Sydney 1971).

⁴⁸ Government of Singapore, *Urban Redevelopment Authority Act*, 1974.

gave the state the legal power to expropriate properties, rural and urban, as and when required and therefore made the implementation of the Concept Plan a practical reality. Vacant land, buildings or entire kampongs were acquired and modified – if necessary, evacuated, demolished and redeveloped. Between 1965 and 1988, over 1,200 sites were expropriated and almost 270,000 families displaced – about a third of the population.⁴⁹ Singapore is unique in Southeast Asia in that the kampongs were eventually completely replaced by public housing.⁵⁰ The government's ability to do so was indicative of its power to implement its social and economic agenda without significant opposition or social unrest. Chua Beng Huat has argued that such measures as the demolition of kampongs to make way for new public housing were indicative of a top-down style of government based on a hyper-technical rationality, with little participation from a population that accepted these measures as part of the process of building the nation – and as a trade-off for the real improvements in the standard of living.⁵¹ The HDB was quite explicit in its priorities, stating that 'in land-scarce Singapore it is paradoxical that we should have a large piece of strategically located and valuable land right in the heart of the City predominantly occupied by slum dwellers, constituting a hindrance to our progress and growth'.⁵²

With the British model of new towns adopted, the Housing and Development Board took on the task of building large, high-rise public housing estates. These were built at an astounding rate: a 1963 Australian newspaper report stated that one flat was completed every 45 minutes, with a ten-storey block of 120 units being completed every four days.⁵³ In 1959, less than 9 per cent of the population lived in public housing. By 1974 this had increased to almost 43 per cent, and by 1989 to 87 per cent of the population.⁵⁴ In the process, it also gave the government the means of changing and managing the distribution of ethnic communities. To avoid ethnic 'enclaves' and to encourage a multi-ethnic society, apartment buildings were mixed, and a quota was maintained on minority population in each housing estate.⁵⁵ It also conveniently served the political purpose of avoiding ethnic voting blocks.

⁴⁹ De Koninck, Drolet, and Girard, *Singapore: An Atlas of Perpetual Territorial Transformation*, 26.

⁵⁰ Loh, *Squatters into Citizens*, 3.

⁵¹ Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*: 204. See also Chapter 6, "Not depoliticised but ideologically successful: The public housing programme", 124-146.

⁵² HDB, *First Decade in Public Housing*, 59.

⁵³ "Housing Plans Forge Ahead: Singapore Builds One Flat Every 45 Minutes." *Canberra Times*, 14 March 1963.

⁵⁴ De Koninck, Drolet, and Girard, *Singapore: An Atlas of Perpetual Territorial Transformation*, 30.

⁵⁵ Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, 140.

Home ownership of public housing was encouraged, with the launch in 1964 of the Home Ownership for the People Scheme.⁵⁶ From 1968, workers could purchase their flats by using substantial amounts from their Central Provident Fund (CPF) – a retirement benefits scheme (first introduced by the colonial government in 1955) into which workers had compulsory savings contributions taken out of their wages and to which the government also contributed.⁵⁷ This had many practical advantages for both government and the community, but it also served an ideological cause of yoking citizens emotionally and practically to the new nation. Post-colonial scholar Robbie Goh has described the public housing program in Singapore as a kind of ‘soft intervention’, ‘an infrastructural and symbolic insertion of the ideas of continual economic progress, guided freedom and national unity across racial and social groups, which the government sees as crucial to the country’s survival’.⁵⁸ We can see this in the 1970 HDB review of its first decade: ‘a good home, pleasant environment and a job gives the ordinary working man that much impetus to keep his country stable and orderly. The final measure of Singapore’s low cost housing success is the total failure of Communist and communalist appeals to people in the Board’s estates and the drop in crime’.⁵⁹ The *Straits Times* newspaper (by then government-controlled) was even more explicit in a 1997 commemorative article, writing that:

Built nationalism has been the medium of nation-building. The Housing Board is therefore more than a board, and is more than housing: its blocks are the nation made concrete, Singapore made home.⁶⁰

The first New Town, Queenstown, completed in the mid-1960s and described by the HDB as reflecting the policy of providing a ‘Total Environment’, included landscaping, bus services, a sports complex, a shopping centre in each neighbourhood, a town centre with ‘cinemas, an emporium, restaurants, a night-club, a Japanese Garden and other social community facilities’, and housing located near primary and secondary schools.⁶¹ While basing it on the British New Town model, the HDB had replanned Queenstown not only to conserve land but also ‘to ensure a much more essentially Asian character’:

⁵⁶ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 317.

⁵⁷ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 317.

⁵⁸ Robbie Goh, "Ideologies of 'Upgrading' in Singapore Public Housing: Post-modern Style, Globalisation and Class Construction in the Built Environment," *Urban Studies* 38, no. 9 (2001): 1601.

⁵⁹ HBD, *First Decade in Public Housing*, 9.

⁶⁰ “HBD as nation-building and built nationalism”, *Sunday Straits Times*, 28 September, 1997.

⁶¹ HBD, *First Decade in Public Housing*, 18-19.

Not for them the self-woven cocoon of privacy which is the ideal of the average English suburban family ... a degree of communal living ... was what they were accustomed to and enjoyed. To have deprived them of it, in deference to a well-meaning but quite alien set of planning principles, would have been a great mistake.⁶²

Toa Payoh followed in 1973, and subsequently several others, including Woodlands in the north of the island.⁶³ Each New Town was provided with shops, playgrounds, schools and other facilities.

Schools in the city centre were progressively relocated to the New Towns as the civic centre increasingly developed as the commercial hub. The Convent's boarding program had already closed in 1963 due to the steady decrease in boarders— from 80 in the early 1950s to 'just a handful' in the early 1960s – and the schools had become increasingly physically divorced from their student population as families moved to the New Towns.⁶⁴ The number of babies abandoned at the Convent gate had also steadily fallen from the 1950s in line with wider social changes taking place. It became more acceptable for families to ask for help, social services improved, contraception became more universally available and accepted, medical improvements meant there were fewer child deaths, women were increasingly earning money by working outside the home, and cultural perceptions of the value of children had changed. By 1968, the number of babies left at the gate had dropped substantially from 100 in 1953 to fifty.⁶⁵ In response, the IJ Sisters set up Girls' Town in the same compound as the Bukit Timah Convent.⁶⁶ Children under five years of age continued to be cared for at the Victoria Street Convent, but were then transferred to Girls' Town. This new centre was intended to better replicate a family environment for the girls, a practice that had come to be favoured in residential care services, generally, in the West around that time. It could accommodate up to eighty girls, in family units of ten. Each block had a dormitory, bathrooms and study rooms,

⁶² Housing and Development Board, *50,000 up: Homes for the People* (Singapore: Singapore Government, 1965?), 40.

⁶³ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 317.

⁶⁴ Lily Kong, Low Soon Ai, and Jacqueline Yip, *Convent Chronicles: History of a Pioneer Mission School for Girls in Singapore* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1994), 84.

⁶⁵ Eugene Wijesigha and Rene Nicolas, *Going Forth: The Catholic Church in Singapore 1819-2004* (Singapore: Commissioned and Published by His Most Rev. Nicolas Chia, Titular Roman Catholic Archbishop of Singapore, 2006), 261.

⁶⁶ Elaine Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus: 150 Years in Singapore* (Penang: The Lady Superior of Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, 2004), 253.

and girls learnt how to cook their own meals.⁶⁷ In a sense, the decentralisation of services had begun.

Already, two other schools established in the early colonial era – the Raffles Institute and the Raffles Girls School – had been moved out of the city centre and the buildings demolished as the government pushed ahead with the development of the commercial centre and relocated schools to the suburbs where the steady HDB building program was continuing. Shortly after the government's interest in the CHIJ site, the Tao Nan School was moved out in 1982 (now the Peranakan Museum), the St Joseph's Institution in 1988 (now part of the Singapore Art Museum), and the Catholic High School in 1992 (now part of the Singapore Art Museum).⁶⁸ Their repurposing as museums – that is, as cultural institutions and holders of the nation's memories – again reflects the conflation of the cultural and the colonial.

All this social engineering produced a massive redistribution of the population. In 1957, three quarters of the population lived within eight kilometres of the mouth of the Singapore River, in Chinatown or in the close suburbs of the urban centre. By 1980, about half of those residents had relocated.⁶⁹ The city centre was being transformed into a commercial and business district, helped by the Sale of Sites program whereby the URA sold off sites by tender to businesses to build hotels, shopping centres and other such initiatives.⁷⁰ Rent control over private dwellings, which had been introduced after World War One to address housing shortages and protect tenants, was progressively phased out from 1988 to assist in moving residents out of the city centre and to encourage landlords to renovate their properties.⁷¹ These changes in the city centre reflected a changed perception of the nature of the city as an urban form – a greater distinction between what was 'centre' and what was 'suburb'. Singaporeans had to become used to rapid change in the physical landscape, or as the writer Cherian George called it, 'an unsettling impermanence'.⁷²

⁶⁷ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 253.

⁶⁸ Kwok Kian Woon, Ho Weng Hin, and Tan Kar Lin, *Between Forgetting and Remembering: Memories and the National Library* (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000), 41.

⁶⁹ De Koninck, Drolet, and Girard, *Singapore: An Atlas of Perpetual Territorial Transformation*, 28.

⁷⁰ Ole Johan Dale, *Urban Planning in Singapore: The Transformation of a City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37 and 143.

⁷¹ Dale, *Urban Planning in Singapore*, 89.

⁷² Cherian George, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control 1990-2000* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2000), 190.

Towards the global city: A place for heritage conservation?

This period of economic and social development was lauded by many. Beamish and Ferguson, in their 1985 book *History of Modern Singapore: The Making of a City*, described the physical transformation of Singapore as ‘one of the wonders of the architectural and planning world’.⁷³ In a similar vein, architecture sociologist Stephen Yeh wrote in 1989 that the Garden City vision was couched in ‘the still larger and more holistic perspective of turning Singapore into a fully developed country inhabited by a cultivated society’, and that ‘what has emerged is a near-utopian scenario’.⁷⁴ If the aim was perhaps not explicitly to create Utopia, the ongoing transformation of Singapore was certainly part of a larger and longer plan to develop Singapore as a global city.

The government’s ambition was expressed as early as 1965, during its short-lived participation in the Federation of Malaysia:

What is Urban Renewal and why the need for it in Singapore? In Singapore, Urban Renewal means no less than the gradual demolition of virtually all of the whole 1,500 acres of the old city and its replacement by an integrated modern city centre worthy of Singapore’s future role as the New York of Malaysia.⁷⁵

I have used part of this quote in the title of this chapter because it is quite explicit in its intention to undertake ‘the gradual demolition of virtually all ... of the old city’, or as it also stated, ‘the festering heart of the old city itself, will, stone by stone, be torn out and renewed ...’⁷⁶

This is an astounding claim; yet, to a large extent, this is exactly what the government planned and systematically achieved over the following fifty years. It was not achieved by stealth, but rather stands as physical evidence of the PAP’s ideology and approach. For many Singaporeans, this has been unsettling. One resident, Simon Tay, wrote in 1991:

The beach at Changi where my family went in the weekends of my youth has been reshaped by landfills and given over to the airport. The school I studied in has shifted to a new building, in another part of the city. The field where I used to play football is now a car park ... When returning to Singapore after five, three or

⁷³ Beamish and Ferguson, *A History of Singapore Architecture*, 163.

⁷⁴ Stephen Yeh, “The Idea of the Garden City,” in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, ed. Kernial Singh Sanhu and Paul Wheatley (Singapore ISEAS, 1989), 831.

⁷⁵ Housing and Development Board, *Homes for the People*, 84.

⁷⁶ Housing and Development Board, *Homes for the People*, 84.

even a single year, it is necessary to be prepared for new streets and buildings, a sense of displacement.⁷⁷

The ambition to be a global city like New York left little room for concerns about heritage conservation as the focus was on a future transformed city and nation. Lim Chee Onn, Chairman of the Singapore National Heritage Board, reflecting on the early years, highlighted the urgency of development for the new nation when he stated:

There was simply no time to rearrange the furniture in the sitting room while pressing matters had to be attended to in the kitchen. Indeed on quite a number of occasions there were fires in the kitchen that had to be put out promptly. In the 60s and 70s it was not surprising that conservation did not feature highly, if at all, in our national agenda.⁷⁸

Conservation was considered ‘irrelevant and even anti-development’.⁷⁹ Sociologist Terence Chong has proposed that ‘this “future Singapore” was imagined as a global city first and a nation second, for it was believed that only as the former could the latter exist’.⁸⁰ He also suggested that heritage awareness was not a political priority because it was considered ‘but a few small steps from cultural superiority and ethnic difference at a time when the leadership decreed the erasure of our “ancestral ghosts” from our immigrant histories in order to forge a “multiracial” society tabula rasa’.⁸¹ That is, there was a concern that a focus on the past could undermine the government’s ‘4Ms’ policy – multi-racialism, multi-lingualism, multi-culturalism and multiple religions – and cause social conflict.⁸² In this way, advocating for heritage conservation could be seen as both anti-development and anti-government.⁸³

There were some signs of the beginnings of an appreciation of heritage conservation from the 1970s. The 1971 Concept Plan noted that ‘much of the atmosphere of the central area is derived from the shophouses which accommodate a host of different activities’ and contribute

⁷⁷ Simon Tay, *Over Singapore: Aerial Views of the Island Republic* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1993), 23.

⁷⁸ Martin Perry, Lily Kong, and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State* (Chichester: Wiley, 1997), 253.

⁷⁹ William Lim, President of Singapore Heritage Society, in the Forward to Robert Powell, *Living Legacy: Singapore's Architectural Heritage Renewed* (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 1994).

⁸⁰ Terence Chong, "From Neglect to Nostalgia: the History of our Heritage," *Salt* (2014), www.salt.org.sg/from-neglect-to-nostalgia-the-history-of-our-heritage/, accessed 22 January, 2014.

⁸¹ Chong, "From Neglect to Nostalgia".

⁸² Roy Jones and Brian Shaw, "Palimpsests of progress: Erasing the past and rewriting the future in developing societies - Case studies of Singapore and Jakarta," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 125.

⁸³ Powell, *Living Legacy*, 25.

to the 'character and townscape of the old city'.⁸⁴ It concluded that 'the most difficult problem is to improve living and working conditions without destroying the vibrant community life'.⁸⁵ It advocated the rehabilitation of areas such as Chinatown and 'Arab Town', which were 'essentially representative of the colourful and unique character of central Singapore'.⁸⁶ It also recommended that 'buildings of historic, civic and architectural significance need to be defended against mutilation, and against the destruction of their immediate environment through the intrusion of incompatible neighbours'.⁸⁷

In the same year, the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB) was established to preserve historically and architecturally significant buildings.⁸⁸ In 1976 the URA initiated area-wide studies of conservation and rehabilitation opportunities in areas such as Chinatown, which led to the Central Area Structure Plan of 1986 and the conservation of seven key areas (Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India, Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, Cairnhill and Emerald Hill), and which included over 3,200 buildings, many of which were shophouses.⁸⁹ Nonetheless, in this period, numerous shophouses were also demolished, contributing to the disappearance of many traditional retail activities.⁹⁰

Writing about the tension between development and heritage conservation in these years, Lily Kong noted that 'the years of stirring consciousness were long ones, and during those years, many beautiful buildings with historical and architectural significance were demolished'.⁹¹ Significant buildings were lost, including Coleman's House (demolished 1969), the Adelphi Hotel (1980) and numerous shophouses.⁹² Some were closely linked with the city's colonial past; Coleman, as mentioned earlier, was the Superintendent of Public Works in Singapore during the early years of the colony and designed many of the houses and public buildings in the European sector, including Caldwell House, which was subsequently part of the

⁸⁴ Crooks Mitchell Peacock Stewart Pty Ltd, "The urban renewal & development project", 2.

⁸⁵ Crooks Mitchell Peacock Stewart Pty Ltd, "The urban renewal & development project", 2.

⁸⁶ Crooks Mitchell Peacock Stewart Pty Ltd, "The urban renewal & development project", 17.

⁸⁷ Crooks Mitchell Peacock Stewart Pty Ltd, "The urban renewal & development project", 40.

⁸⁸ Government of Singapore, *Preservation of Monuments Act (Cap 239)*, 1971.

⁸⁹ Lily Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future: Urban Heritage in Singapore* (Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2011), 39-41. See also 254-255 for a useful listing of 'Singapore's conservation milestones'.

⁹⁰ Shirlena Huang, Peggy Teo, and Hock Mui Heng, "Conserving the Civic and Cultural District: State Policies and Public Opinion," in *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore*, ed. Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995), 25.

⁹¹ Kong, *Conserving the Past*, 34.

⁹² Huang, Teo and Heng, "Conserving the Civic and Cultural District", 25.

Convent.⁹³ Perhaps surprisingly, the Law Courts, built in 1884, the bastion of power of empire, were also demolished in 1975.⁹⁴ While the colonial past had been embraced, as I argued earlier, the withdrawal of British troops from Singapore in 1971 as part of the 'East of Suez' policy of the British government had been a shock. It was widely perceived as another betrayal by Britain, again leaving Singapore undefended.⁹⁵ In some senses, the 'betrayal' in 1971 had shifted the post-colonial identity far more than independence did. It also meant that once some key colonial buildings were demolished, it became easier to imagine others, such as the Convent, meeting the same fate.

Despite the demolitions, there was an increased emphasis on conservation in the 1980s brought about by a number of factors. It coincided with a growing nostalgia for a 'simpler' past, a reaction to the relentless drive of economic development, and an increased interest in history and heritage, as evidenced by the establishment of the Singapore Heritage Society in 1986.⁹⁶ Politically, there was a growing concern within the PAP about the westernisation of Singapore society and the perceived loss of 'Asian values'.⁹⁷ The first Deputy Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong stated in 1988, 'we are part of a long Asian civilisation and we should be proud of it. We should not be assimilated by the West and become a pseudo-Western society'.⁹⁸ Economically, there was concern about the decline in tourism after the economic recession of the mid-1980s and a view that tourist numbers were declining because of 'the lack of colour in the increasingly antiseptic city-state', caused by the loss of 'Oriental mystique and charm'.⁹⁹ Turnbull wrote, perhaps somewhat scathingly of tourists:

The new towns and clean public housing which provided a healthier and more comfortable lifestyle to the masses than the crowded shacks and slums of the past, held little appeal for the tourist, who missed the picturesque spectacle of other people's poverty.¹⁰⁰

⁹³ See Hancock, *Coleman's Singapore*.

⁹⁴ Huang, Teo and Heng, "Conserving the Civic and Cultural District", 25. For a detailed examination of the power of empire as portrayed in the Supreme Court building, see Wong Yunn Chi, "Representation in context: A study of the Singapore Supreme Court Building," *Singapore Architect* 216(2002).

⁹⁵ For a full discussion, see P. L. Pham, *Ending 'East of Suez': The British Decision to Withdraw from Malaysia and Singapore 1964-1968*, (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2010).

⁹⁶ Powell, *Living Legacies*, p. 23. See also www.singaporeheritage.org/?page_id=1363, accessed 23 March 2014.

⁹⁷ Perry, Kong, and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 254.

⁹⁸ C.T. Goh, "Speeches: A Bimonthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches," (Singapore 1988), 15.

⁹⁹ Perry, Kong and Yeoh, *Singapore: A Developmental City State*, 256.

¹⁰⁰ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*. 318.

The success of the push to become a globalised city was beginning to have a downside. Post-colonialist Ackbar Abbas has written about Hong Kong as having developed a 'culture of disappearance' since it is in a state of constant rebuilding, which 'dispenses even with the pathos of decay'.¹⁰¹ We can see the parallels with Singapore, which are also reflected in architect Rem Koolhaas's concept of the generic city, 'a city without history':

The great originality of the Generic City is simply to abandon what doesn't work – what has outlived its use ... The Generic City is all that remains of what used to be the city. The Generic City is the post-city being prepared on the site of the ex-city.¹⁰²

Because of such concerns, heritage conservation was reconsidered in Singapore in the 1980s and came to be seen as a way of reversing some of these trends. There was a move away from demolition of older buildings and a revaluing of older areas, some of which were redeveloped and re-imagined as 'historical districts'. This saw the naming of 'heritage areas' such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam. Legal scholar Kwek Mean Luck has argued that this was not an ideological change per se, but rather a practical response to a problem.¹⁰³ He argued that the reversal in thinking was helped by the oversupply of office space by the mid-1980s plus the success of land reclamation, which meant there was a supply of sufficient unreleased land stock to last for many years.¹⁰⁴ For Kwek, this change in thinking should be seen as a continuation of the government's pragmatism.

The PAP government has often been characterised as having an ideology of political pragmatism, first exhibited in the early years of government and persisting to this day. This is a very general term and one might argue that all successful governments are 'pragmatic', in the sense of being practical and realistic in their policies. In Singapore Studies, however, it has come to be used to mean an approach which privileges economic growth, so, as Chua Beng Huat wrote, 'this singular goal is simultaneously the singular criterion for initiating and assessing all government activities, in terms of how an act will aid or retard this growth'.¹⁰⁵ Reflecting this pragmatism, conservation moved up the list of the government's priorities but

¹⁰¹ Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 63.

¹⁰² Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 1250-52.

¹⁰³ Kwek Mean Luck, "Singapore: A Skyline of Pragmatism," in *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity*, ed. Ryan Bishop, John Phillips, and Wei-Wei Yeo (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 113.

¹⁰⁴ Kwek, "Singapore: A Skyline of Pragmatism", 116.

¹⁰⁵ Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*: 68.

was based around the view that conservation should not be an economic burden to the government and should maximise economic returns.¹⁰⁶

The Convent and the MRT

In 1980, the government's urban development policies impacted directly on the Convent, which now occupied an entire city block in central Singapore. It was a substantial parcel of land – 2.8 hectares – in a central civic and commercial position and also on the route of the new Mass Rapid Transport (MRT) system envisaged as a key transport mode linking the New Towns with the central district and industrial districts. The 'modern' city was to be one where the centre was primarily used for commercial enterprises and where schools were located in the suburbs where families increasingly lived. The needs of the new nation took priority and the Convent site was compulsorily acquired by the state.

In exchange for the Victoria Street site, the government offered up two sites in suburban Toa Payoh and Ang Mo Kio, on which it would build new accommodation for the two schools (CHIJ and St Nicolas Girls' School), as well as accommodation for the Sisters. The government received no appeals against what was then the likely demolition of the Convent buildings – yet we should not assume that there was no disquiet. Rather, as I will explore later in the chapter, the hegemony of the state made it difficult for opposition to be effective. Sister Elizabeth Browne, then Principal of the CHIJ school, has said that they agreed to the government's proposal because it was an opportunity for change and improvement, as the Victoria Street site lacked modern amenities, was troubled by traffic noise and had a sense of 'claustrophobia'.¹⁰⁷ Toa Payoh was one of the earlier housing estates and the Sisters considered that this would be an opportunity for them to serve the less privileged.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, Meyers also writes that Sister Elizabeth felt that 'her only regret was that she has lost the battle to keep CHIJ at its original site in Victoria Street'.¹⁰⁹

Lily Kong has argued that the Singapore government takes a functionalist approach to religious places generally, and periodically demolishes and relocates religious buildings to

¹⁰⁶ Kwek, "Singapore: A Skyline of Pragmatism", 114.

¹⁰⁷ Kong, Low Soon Ai, and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*: 138.

¹⁰⁸ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 149.

¹⁰⁹ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*: 77.

make way for public projects, 'a reflection of how pragmatism, efficiency and orderliness are emphasized over other values, such as the sacred meanings which adherents invest in religious places'.¹¹⁰ She argued that resistance has been mostly ineffectual because of a number of factors: religious leaders have tended to de-emphasise the sacredness of religious places, arguing that religious buildings do not have a monopoly on sacredness and that all material things are transient; the view that it is the community, rather than buildings, that is sacred; poor bargaining power because the government sets the rules and procedures; and the lack of a coordinated voice.¹¹¹ She argued that in view of this generally ineffectual resistance, individuals and groups have responded to state actions primarily by adaptation, even if somewhat grudgingly. Many of these processes were at play in relation to the CHIJ site.

At the time of the government's interest in the CHIJ site, there was no 'old girls association' and therefore a lack of a coordinated voice opposing the plan.¹¹² Whether a coordinated opposition would have made a difference is unknown. A more coordinated public campaign was run in 1999–2000 in an attempt to prevent demolition of the then National Library building to make way for the construction of the Fort Canning Tunnel. It was unsuccessful and the decision was another demonstration of the power of the state to determine the urban make-up of the modern city.¹¹³ In the case of the National Library, however, it was a more modern building that was considered to have little architectural merit. It is unclear whether it would have been considered more worthy of conservation if it was a colonial building – perhaps its 'modernity' meant that it was not 'historic'. Nonetheless it was emotionally significant to many Singaporeans. Their angst over the demolition goes to the heart of the issue of how nations decide what is 'historically significant' and 'worthy' of conservation, an issue I discuss at more length in Chapter Seven.

Exodus, again

In 1983, in preparation for the subsequent closure of the Convent at the Victoria Street site, students staged a pageant of the 'Convent Story', portraying the arrival of the nuns in 1854 and their subsequent years at the Victoria Street site. In the lead-up to the pageant, the Sisters

¹¹⁰ Lily Kong, "Negotiating Conceptions of 'Sacred Space': A Case Study of Religious Buildings in Singapore." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18, no. 3 (1993): 356.

¹¹¹ Kong, "Negotiating Conceptions of Sacred Space": 356.

¹¹² Kong, "Negotiating Conceptions of Sacred Space": 346.

¹¹³ Kwok, Ho and Tan, *Between Forgetting and Remembering*.

at the Convent were searching for material that might be useful to use as resource materials. They came upon an old trunk and, inside, found seven volumes of handwritten diaries covering the period of 1851 to 1971.¹¹⁴ They are not necessarily religious in nature – each scribe chose what she considered significant and of interest. The diaries, the *Annales de Singapour*, were written in French by a succession of nuns allocated the task over the years. The hardcover exercise books were yellowed with age and in parts the ink had faded, but they tell a story of the Convent. Ironically, these significant documents detailing the long history of the Convent in Singapore were found at the very time when the Sisters were moving out of the Victoria Street premises where they had been from 1854.

An Open Day was held on 5 November 1983 for all who wanted to take a last look around the complex. Symbolically, the day operated almost as a funeral wake for the death of the Convent site. It included a variety of memorialising events: visitors were encouraged to sign guest registers; videos of the pageant and of a Singapore Broadcasting Corporation program on the story of the school were screened; school furniture was sold off or given away; and a fun fair was held.

The *Straits Times* had already published several articles on the Convent's history, including the finding of the diaries, and the newspaper covered the Open Day at some length: 'the old students streamed in as early as 7a.m. ... They came alone, in groups of two and more, yet others came with their husbands, boyfriends or parents...Mothers showed their children their former classrooms ... others took photographs with their friends and of familiar spots'.¹¹⁵ In the evening, mass was celebrated in the chapel for the last time and 'was jam-packed with people. When the seats ran out some sat on the floor, some stood at the doors and others looked in through the windows'.¹¹⁶ The mass and the later demolition of the altar effectively deconsecrated the chapel as a religious site, technically transitioning it from a sacred to a secular space.

¹¹⁴ Grace Chng, "The Convent Diaries: Found in Nun's Trunk...Carefully Kept Records of Life in Last Century." *Straits Times*, 2 October 1983. Also "Keeping Alive Touching Moments of Time Past." *The Straits Times*, 12 October 1983.

¹¹⁵ Grace Chng, "Convent's old girls say last goodbye", *Straits Times*, 6 November 1983.

¹¹⁶ Chng, "Convent's old girls say last goodbye".

The Sisters vacated the site in late December 1983, bringing to an end its occupancy on a continuous basis since 1854. Many of its Sisters and students had been sent to Malaya during World War Two, as I described in Chapter Four, but the final exodus was brought about by government direction. The large numbers of visitors to the Open Day reflected the affection felt for the site and the memories attached to it. One of the ‘old girls’, Kelly Chopard, visited the vacated site soon after and wrote:

As expected, the absence of laughing girls, hurrying teachers and calm-looking Sisters made the place look like a graveyard ... The long corridors seemed larger because no blue and white clad girls ran along them. Nobody played “five stones”, “big balloon” or stood around for a good old gossip ... Now all that remained was out-of-date diaries, torn curtains, broken chairs, discarded books, dirty cushions and the dust of many years.¹¹⁷

I return to these issues of attachment and memories in Chapter Eight.

Conclusion

The compulsory acquisition of the Convent site and the exodus of the Sisters and their schools from the city centre was, as I have demonstrated, part of the much wider process of massive urban transformation since independence. Ironically, this race towards a global future drew upon, and extended, the urban planning processes of former colonial governments. Again, in a similar way, the new government moved to impress its will on the landscape and on society with a heady program of land reclamation, public housing and rapid industrialisation, a process largely accepted by citizens as a trade-off for development and higher standards of living.

I have also shown that the place of heritage conservation in the rapidly developing nation was tenuous. Many buildings and streetscapes were lost in this time, both colonial and local, a process that eventually fuelled concerns about a loss of the ‘uniqueness’ of Singapore. While the genesis of a push for greater heritage conservation began to emerge in the 1980s, we see the dilemmas around heritage conservation played out in the decisions made in relation to the Convent site. Similarly, while I have argued that Singapore did value its colonial past and, therefore, its colonial buildings in ways that differed from most other former colonies, at the same time the needs of the ‘modernising’ city in the late 1980s and early 1990s took

¹¹⁷ From the *Catholic News*, February 1984, quoted in Meyers, *The Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 78.

precedence, as typified by the acquisition of the Convent site in order to facilitate the construction of the new MRT system.

An examination of the Convent site in this period tells the story of a city transformed in the years following independence. Urban planning models, which drew on British concepts of public housing and New Towns, led to schools in the city centre progressively being moved out to the suburbs where, increasingly, their students lived. New modes of transport were needed for the growing city and the new underground train system was introduced. The Convent site was prime land in the centre of a rapidly developing city. The newly emerging recognition of the importance of preserving at least some older heritage areas eventually led to most of the Convent buildings being saved from demolition, and to the Chapel and Caldwell House being designated as National Monuments. The government's pragmatic approach to heritage conservation, however, led to the decision to put the remainder of the Convent site out to commercial tender. In the next chapter, I examine the decisions and processes made in relation to tendering the site out to private redevelopment. I also analyse the tender document in terms of its imagined past, the somewhat neglected present and the imagined future.

These issues remain relevant today as Singapore continues to transform itself. As geographers Rodolphe De Koninck, Julie Drolet and Marc Girard have argued, Singapore is a state 'in perpetually planned and replanned transformation'.¹¹⁸ We can see this starkly in the changes in the Central Business District. Figure 13 below shows the same view in 1932, 1986 and in 2012.

¹¹⁸ De Koninck, Drolet, and Girard, *Singapore: An Atlas of Perpetual Territorial Transformation*, 2.

Chapter 6

The tender document and process: 'Renewing an Old Masterpiece'

Introduction

This chapter examines the 1990 tender document, *CHIJ: Renewing an Old Masterpiece*, issued by the Urban Redevelopment Authority to companies interested in submitting a tender for redevelopment of the residual Convent site.¹ The tender document, process and outcomes projected the pragmatic ideology of the Singapore government that conservation of heritage buildings needed to be commercially viable. The tender document, with its richly-coloured artist impressions of potential uses, reflected an imagined view of a historically-sensitive but profitable commercial complex that drew on the colonial past, but was, at the same time, indicative of Singapore's transformation to a modern global city. I look first at the process leading up to the tender launch and the parameters put in place by the URA to respond to community reservations about the redevelopment. I then examine the document as a text, which interprets the colonial past, the post-colonial present and the imagined future. I conclude with a discussion of the successful tender and the reaction to the finished redevelopment.

Although the Convent site was vacated by the Sisters at the end of 1983, construction of the MRT nearby and underneath did not commence until 1986, and the buildings lay vacant for these intervening years. When construction of the train line and stations did begin, there were concerns that the chapel, in particular, might be damaged by the construction works. To minimise this, the pillars of the chapel were reinforced, a new concrete slab was laid, and the stained-glass windows were covered with wooden boards and mesh.² Work on the MRT tunnels was completed in December 1986, and the first five MRT stations commenced operation in November 1987.³ Within three weeks of opening, the one-millionth ride was

¹ Urban Redevelopment Authority, *CHIJ: Renewing an Old Masterpiece* (Singapore: URA, 1990), pages unnumbered.

² "CHIJ Chapel reinforced for MRT work", *Straits Times*, 28 July, 1986, 11.

³ Rodolphe De Koninck, Julie Drolet, and Marc Girard, *Singapore: An Atlas of Perpetual Territorial Transformation* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 56.

recorded.⁴ Although it was considered that minimal damage had been caused to the stained glass, the chapel building was obviously deteriorating. Architect Tay Kheng Soon warned that it would deteriorate further if it was not repaired: paint was peeling, walls were cracked, water seepage was a problem, and some of the stained glass windows had cracked and buckled.⁵

Genesis: Redevelopment slowly underway

In 1987, the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board invited architectural firms to study ways in which the Convent buildings could be restored.⁶ The Board suggested that ideas should respect the architecture and former use of the buildings; the buildings could provide quality entertainment such as music and dance performances for audiences of ‘refined taste’; the upper floors of buildings could be leased to the performing arts for day-time operations; and the ground floor and open spaces could be operated commercially for quality dining and entertainment. Already we see here the beginnings of ideas of ‘refined taste’ and ‘quality dining’ that will be later expressed in the tender document. Significantly, the study excluded the 1950s secondary school buildings. These were scheduled for demolition so that a MRT Operations Control Centre could be built in their place – the buildings were directly above the intersection of the North-South MRT line and the future East-West line.⁷ It remains significant, however, that it was the 1950s buildings that were demolished, rather than the early colonial buildings. The much later controversy over the demolition in 2004 of the 1960 National Library building suggests that colonial buildings were generally privileged over the post-colonial, another indication of Singapore’s embrace of its colonial past.

Forty-eight firms had responded to the STPB study, but it was not until May 1990 that an announcement was made about how the government planned to proceed.⁸ The remaining site – that not used by the MRT – would be put out to tender to the commercial sector. Up until then, it had been understood that the government would be responsible for restoration of the site, so the announcement of the commercial tender caused further unease among former

⁴ <http://www.lta.gov.sg/content/ltaweb/en/about-lta/our-history/1980s.html>, accessed 5 March 2014.

⁵ Lily Kong, Low Soon Ai, and Jacqueline Yip, *Convent Chronicles: History of a Pioneer Mission School for Girls in Singapore* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1994), 173.

⁶ Lily Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future: Urban Heritage in Singapore* (Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2011), 200-201.

⁷ Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future*, 201.

⁸ Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future*, 201.

students and others emotionally attached to the Convent site. They were concerned that the tender announcement would mean that profit-making would be put ahead of conservation concerns. The Old Girls' Association, by then established for seven years, collected 16,000 signatures on a petition presented to the Minister for Social Development, urging that plans for the chapel be in keeping with its original use.⁹

Geographer and Old Girl, Lily Kong, has noted that the sense of loss and displacement for those who had attended the Convent schools was heightened by the more general changes that had already taken place *around* the Convent site: three of the four sides of the site were surrounded by newish modern buildings, and Victoria Street itself had become a two-way street. Kong was nostalgic for the 'old haunts that Town Convent students were used to' – the bookshops nearby, the coconut drink stall, the coffee shop and ice-cream and snack-bar – but they had gone, leaving 'a Town Convent standing forlornly in unfamiliar territory, empty of students and nuns'.¹⁰ This reminds us that a building stands in a spatial context, and that the attachment to place is more complex than just to a specific building; it is to a building in a particular context, some of which is temporal, and the surroundings to the building may be just as significant to the importance of the place.

Despite such opposition to the plan, the URA's position was that the government could not finance all restoration projects in Singapore, particularly if there was no identified government use for the buildings. But involving the private sector would make such projects economically viable.¹¹ As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the push to develop the 'modern' city meant that there was a continuous tension between heritage conservation and economic development, which was uneasily reconciled by a focus on the maximisation of financial returns. Architect William Lim, a participant at a public forum in 2000, recalled that when the issue of the Convent's redevelopment was first announced, a joint approach was made to government by the 'Old Girls', the Singapore Heritage Society and the La Salle Fine Arts College to relocate the music school to the Convent site with money raised by a public campaign.¹² He recounted that the government said the group could submit a tender and 'see

⁹ Kong, Low & Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 175.

¹⁰ Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future*, 203.

¹¹ Kong, Low & Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 175-176.

¹² Kwok Kian Woon, Ho Weng Hin, and Tan Kar Lin, *Between Forgetting and Remembering: Memories and the National Library* (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000), 133-34.

if you could get the highest bid'. Mr Lim concluded: 'So I think we really got to understand the force of the idea, of what really mattered.' In other words, proposals from community groups had to compete in the commercial marketplace.

The government was exhibiting its colonial legacy of prioritising economic development and, in the tender process that followed, an ordered bureaucracy of rules and decision-making. Anthropologist Matthew Hull has examined the colonial legacy of bureaucracy in Pakistan in what he called the 'government of paper'¹³ He argued that there was a carry-over of personnel and ethos after independence, and that although documents and procedures may have changed over time, many bureaucratic practices from the colonial period remained.¹⁴ It is not reasonable to make a direct comparison between the sometimes antiquated practices of Pakistan and those of Singapore – yet Singapore also was following, albeit in a different way, bureaucratic processes that developed out of the British colonial tradition. Indeed, the colonial government in Singapore used a tender process to sell land, as in its mid-1950s attempt to sell land along the newly constructed Shenton Way.¹⁵ The advertising of a tender is now considered best practice in business in the West, allowing a degree of bureaucratic procedure and transparency. In this latter aspect, it fits with the Singapore government's stated strategy of attracting international corporations by being seen as open and free of corruption.¹⁶ It opted for a tender process, whereby businesses or organisations could submit a written bid detailing their plans for the use of the CHIJ site and the amount of money they would pay for the site, with a committee determining the successful bid.

The tender was launched by the URA in May 1990 and closed on 8 November 1990. The proposed development was specified as being 'for the preservation/conservation and adaptive reuse of existing buildings as well as new developments'. In response to public concerns about commercialisation, the URA announced that it had introduced several safeguards: there would be no high-rise construction; the permissible gross floor areas above and below ground were specified; and the chapel was to be used only for cultural, religious or other

¹³ Matthew Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (Berkeley, Calif. & London: University of California Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Hull, *Government of Paper*, 6.

¹⁵ Ole Johan Dale, *Urban Planning in Singapore: The Transformation of a City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 143.

¹⁶ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965 – 2000* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), see Chapter 12, "Keeping the Government Clean".

‘sensitive’ purposes, with the remaining buildings used for cultural, arts and recreational activities, including restaurants and shops.¹⁷ The criteria for selection of the winning tender would, in addition to price and other technical compliance measures, be based on ‘planning and architectural merit’. This included ‘appropriate and sensitive restoration of the existing buildings’, with landscape design and the use of the open quadrangle enhancing the character of the buildings. Proposed uses of the chapel and other buildings ‘should enhance the image of the Civic District’.

Significantly, the developer had the option of including the chapel in the tender or excluding it. Perhaps this option was given because it was considered that the chapel might not be commercially viable or might not fit with a developer’s vision of potential use. There were also options with the dormitory: the tenderer could retain it and ‘build a new extension abutting it’, or alternatively could demolish it and rebuild it ‘in character with its original design incorporating a new extension’. The latter option – demolish and rebuild – is reminiscent of the ‘demolish it to save it’ approach to heritage conservation, where a replica stands in place of the authentic – why have the original if a replica is so much better? In contrast, the chapel and Caldwell House were declared to be National Monuments on 26 October 1990.¹⁸ Whether intentional or not, as well as protecting the buildings, this helped to raise the status of the site as a site of colonial and national importance and thus best suited to ‘sensitive’ and ‘refined’ uses. Restoration of the site was expected to cost about Singapore \$30 million and it was ‘expected that the successful bidder would complete the project in five years or less.’¹⁹ In a city in ‘perpetual transformation’, the length of time allowed suggests that it was considered a time-consuming and difficult conservation project.

The tender document

The tender was outlined in the URA document *CHIJ: Renewing an Old Masterpiece*. The document was issued in an envelope and opened out, with a central smaller insert showing the layout of each building. Figure 13a below shows the document partially opened. The front cover (silver) is on the far left and also opened out. The central section can be seen, with each of the buildings appearing as pink outlines; using this section, the reader could turn to the

¹⁷ Kong, Low & Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 177.

¹⁸ <http://www.nhb.gov.sg/places/sites-and-monuments/national-monuments/former-convent-of-the-holy-infant-jesus-chapel-and-caldwell-house-now-chijmes>, accessed 30 August 2015.

¹⁹ Kong, Low & Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 177.

relevant building outline when viewing the corresponding pages of the main document. The right-hand page in Figure 14a is the first page of the tender brief, which appeared at the end of the document and stated the detailed conditions and requirements of the tender. Figure 14b below shows the body of the document.

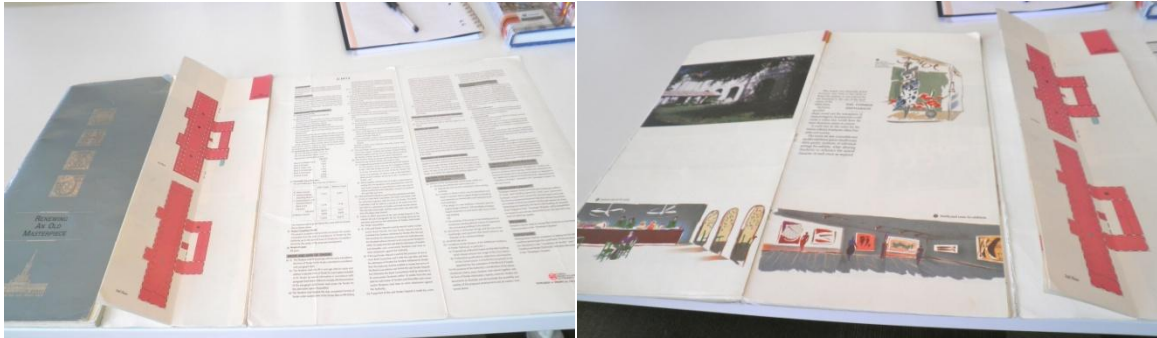


Fig. 14a: Front cover (far left), unopened. Fig. 14b: Inside view

Source: All photos of the tender document in this chapter are by the author.

Note the use of photographs of the existing structures, many of which had deteriorated further in the seven years since the Convent was vacated. They are juxtaposed with artist impressions of possible future uses. Some pages also included line drawings of buildings and/or line drawings of imagined past uses. In Figure 15 below, various images of the chapel are overlaid.



Fig. 15: Past, present and future of the Chapel

The use of artist impressions on the same pages as photographs of the actual Convent buildings acts to render the buildings themselves part of the imagined past and imagined future. Here the past, present and future are meshed into a new ‘urban imaginary’, which can potentially be realised by the successful tenderer. In a Singapore historiography that has always been linear – progressing steadily – this is a glimpse of a less linear view, although as I will show, the emphasis remains on the imagined future.

The document opens first to a large map of the civic district, the section headed ‘The Heart of the City’. The text briefly reminds us of the ‘multitudes at the heart of Singapore (who) have lived and worked to the chimes of the bells’, and of the thousands of girls who attended CHIJ. It then refers to the 1983 exodus of the Sisters and the relocation to Toa Payoh, happening when ‘it became evident that the facilities were inadequate for the growing student body’. Facilities *were* becoming cramped and the noise from the surrounding streets was increasing, so this may have been a factor. Yet, the relocation was done at the initiative of the government and there was little scope for opposition to the plan. This hard reality was omitted, perhaps because it did not fit so well with the more romantic picture being painted. The text continues with the statement that the physical structures ‘continue to imbue the area with a graceful elegance’, again a somewhat more idealistic picture than the reality of the increasingly deteriorating state of the buildings, which we can see in some of the photographs later in the document. It then notes that architectural experts regard it as ‘one of the world’s last cloistered buildings still intact today’, a statement that neglects to mention that some of the buildings on the site had already been demolished by the government and the area reduced in size. In other words, the walls of the last intact cloister were in fact already breached.

In the imagined future, the gates to the site will invite Singaporeans and tourists in to the new experience, as we see in Figure 16 below, titled ‘The Gate to a National Treasure’.



Fig. 16: The Gate to a National Treasure

The gate in the line drawing is an embellished illustration of the most elaborate of the Convent gates at the time, the entrance to the St Nicholas Girls' School (the school itself having been demolished to make way for the MRT headquarters).²⁰ The more utilitarian gate through which vehicles drove and which was known to many students as Sister Beatrice's gate, is not shown.²¹ Neither is the 'Baby Gate', where the babies were left and through which they entered their new lives. Gates symbolically and practically signal an entrance, a liminal space between the outside and inside. They are a barrier if closed and an entrance when opened. In the case of ironwork gates such as this one, they allow a glimpse through into the interior. In the document, the gate is consistent with the imagined ambience being developed for the site – a grand entrance to the delights within. Whereas in the past, only those on CHIJ business entered, the renovated Convent site potentially allows everyone into a space previously unobtainable, moving it from the religious to the secular, and rendering the space public.

Throughout, the document draws heavily on a romanticised history of the Convent. Geographer David Lowenthal reminds us that all history is selectively recalled and that we

²⁰ For a photograph of the gate, see Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*: 149.

²¹ For a photograph of the gate, see Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 142.

accentuate aspects deemed 'suitable'.²² For Lowenthal, heritage modifies history, 'drawing selectively and imprecisely from distant and generalised history to make for an intimate conflation of past with present'.²³ So the tender document draws on an idealised past for the Convent. In reference to the chapel, it suggests that 'the colourful portraits of saints Paul, Thomas and others on the aisle windows have no doubt inspired students to greater academic heights especially during school examinations'. In the courtyards, it reminisces that 'school girls romped here during recess, playing basketball and "Four Corners"'. It was not unusual for a nun walking down the corridor to stop short and say a prayer at the statue of Mother Mary within the shady pavilion'. This serves to accentuate a past that is portrayed as simultaneously fragile ('an irreplaceable aspect of Singapore heritage') and tangible (an 'almost palpable atmosphere of devotion').

It is also a past that is inherently colonial. What sets Singapore apart from other former colonies is that its time of deeply felt angst was not the colonial period but rather its sudden expulsion from the Federation of Malaysia. As discussed earlier, the newly independent nation recognised Stamford Raffles as the founder of Singapore, effectively dating its birth from the arrival of British imperialism, a continued memorialisation of a British 'founder', which Phillip Holden has argued is unique among post-colonial states.²⁴ We are told in the tender document that CHIJ 'needs no introduction to the community' and that 'instant recognition and prestige have been its birth right' – the unwritten implication being that it is a familiar and prestigious landmark. Ien Ang and Jon Stratton have written that 'it is impossible for Singapore to erase its derivative and artificial existence as a Western colonial construct – more than any other nation in the region, Western colonialism is inscribed in Singapore's very ontology'.²⁵ As I pointed out in previous chapters, this is a very different post-colonialism to many other nations. In the terms of Frantz Fanon's theories of decolonisation, Singapore is more akin to a situation where new elites replaced the British

²² David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," *Geographical Review* 65, no. 1 (1975).

²³ David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 139.

²⁴ Philip Holden, "The Free Market's Second Coming; Monumentalising Raffles." Chap. 5 In *Reading Culture: Textual Practices in Singapore*, edited by Phyllis Chew and Anneliese Kramer-Dahl (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1999).

²⁵ Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 10, no. 1 (1995): 74.

elites, and colonial structures largely stayed in place.²⁶ Here in the tender document, the past is decidedly colonial and the religious nature of the Convent lends it a genteel feel.

The present, represented by photographs of the Convent buildings, is minimal in the document, which is primarily about an imagined future for the site, yet which is also sensitive to its past. The photograph in Figure 17 below shows the courtyard, with the chapel on the right.



Fig. 17: The courtyard

With the site unoccupied since 1983, the buildings look run-down and neglected. We can see the overgrown grass and the generally bare and somewhat forlorn look of the site. The photograph, in effect, reinforces the ‘rightness’ of restoration and sets the stage for the ‘renaissance’ of the site through development.

The imagined future

This potential imagined renaissance is the key part of the document. In fact the section on the chapel, the ‘grand centrepiece of the Convent’, is titled ‘Primed for a Renaissance’. The document also says of the site generally that ‘its rare architectural features combined with an aura of intellectual and spiritual refinement lends it the makings of a cultural attraction of world-class proportions’. This is consistent with the government’s ambition of transforming Singapore into a ‘global city of the Arts’. In 1989 the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts presented a report that paved the way for a range of statutory bodies such as the National Heritage Board and the National Library Board, and the development of new museums like the Singapore Art Museum, later established in the St. Joseph’s Institution near the Convent

²⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington (London: Macgibbon and Fee, 1965. 1961).

site.²⁷ As with heritage conservation, the government took a pragmatic view that cultural development would assist economic development. The subsequent government report in 1992, *Singapore: Global City of the Arts*, further developed these goals, while the *Renaissance City Report* in 2000 was explicit that ‘we want to position Singapore as a key city in the Asian renaissance of the twenty-first century and a cultural city in the globalised world’.²⁸ These were all steps in the further creation of Singapore’s ‘brand’ as a global city and tourist destination.²⁹ The focus in the document on an idealised future use of the site is not only practical, since it is setting a framework for use, but it also reflects the significance of the future for Singapore. That is, the focus is firmly on the future rather than the past, and on a utopian future of growth, consumption and modernity.

Throughout the tender document, line drawings and artist impressions are used to imagine how the site might be redeveloped. The chapel, Kong suggested, had been made optional for inclusion in the tender because it was regarded by many as a ‘commercial albatross’.³⁰ If this was perhaps due to a lack of imagination in how to incorporate the chapel into a commercial enterprise, then the tender document helpfully provided ideas. There are several colourful artist impressions of possible uses for the chapel – as an art gallery (Figure 18a below), a small concert hall (Figure 18b below), a museum, and as a ‘centre for thematic cultural activity’.

²⁷Singapore Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts. "Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts," (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1989).

²⁸Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, *Singapore - Global City for the Arts*, Ministry of Information and the Arts (Singapore: Singapore Government, 1995). Also *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore*, Ministry of Information and the Arts (Singapore: Singapore Government, 2000), 4. See also Chapter 5, “The Making of a Renaissance City: Building Cultural Monuments in Singapore”, in Lily Kong, Ching Chia-ho, and Chou Tsu-Lung, eds., *Arts, Culture and the Making of Global Cities: Creating New Urban Landscapes in Asia* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2015).

²⁹ See also Can-seng Ooi, "Reimagining Singapore as a creative nation: The politics of place branding," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 4, no. 4 (2008).

³⁰ Kong, Low & Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 176.



Fig. 18a: Chapel as art gallery Fig. 18b: Chapel as concert hall

The text suggests that it might also be ‘a nurturing environment for children’s artistic endeavours, to tie-in with “Infant” in the present name of the Convent’. The possible uses fit with the earlier STPB suggestions of activities for audiences of ‘refined taste’, with the goal of the ‘city of the arts’. They are also traditional European cultural activities, in keeping with the ideas of developing Singapore as a ‘renaissance city’.

Other imagined uses for the site are elaborated throughout the document. It is suggested that Caldwell House would be suitable for ‘elegant dining in formal style’. Art galleries, music or performance studios and function rooms are also suggested as appropriate. The irony here is that Caldwell House was where the nuns lived, and as Figure 19a below shows, the actual past is far less glamorous than the imagined future.



Fig. 19a: Caldwell House, 1934. Source: *C.H.I.J. Victoria Street 1854-1983*³¹

The food eaten by the Sisters was simple, may have been eaten in silence, and would have occurred out of the public gaze – a long way from the ‘elegant fine dining’ option recommended as creating ‘the atmosphere most appropriate to the image of the CHIJ’. Figure 19b below shows the artist impressions of potential opportunities for dining in the redeveloped Caldwell House.



Fig. 19b Possible scenarios for dining in Caldwell House

The austerity of the nunnery is replaced by the elegance of the women seated at the small table and the almost fantastic image of the woman with the parrot.

³¹ *C.H.I.J. Victoria Street 1854-1983* (Singapore: C.H.I.J., 1983), 32. Also Elaine Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus: 150 Years in Singapore* (Penang: The Lady Superior of Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, 2004), 46.

Similarly, it is suggested that the former dormitory could be used for ‘dining facilities for exclusive corporate functions’ (Figure 20 below).

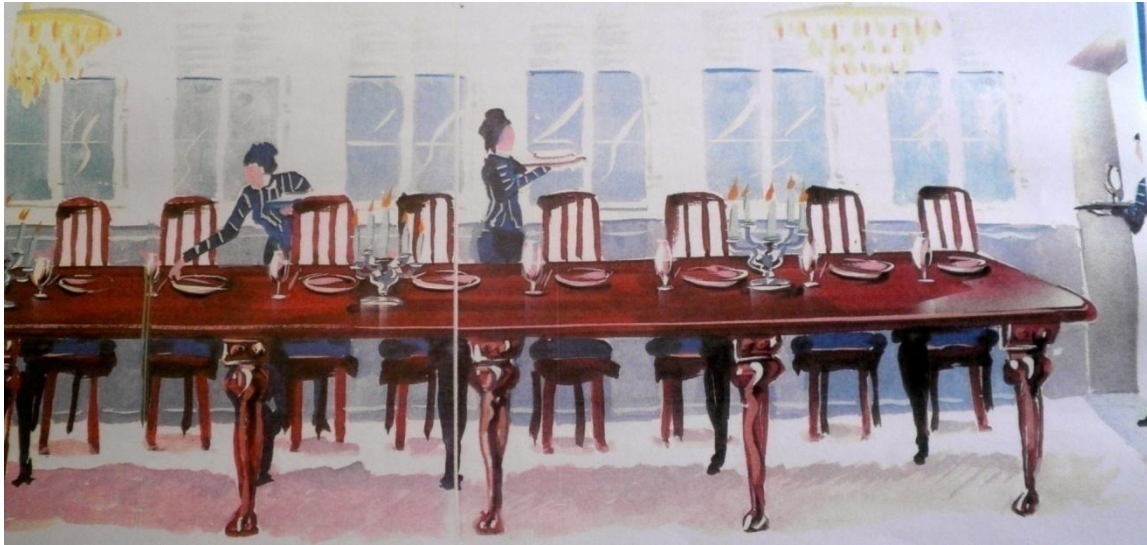


Fig. 20: Dining in the former dormitory.

The two female staff are beautifully dressed and coiffured. They are also white, like the waiter in Figure 19b. In both these representations, we can see the flip from the colonial to the post-colonial moment. When Singapore was a British colony, hotels like the Raffles and clubs such as the Singapore Club were social centres for Europeans of status. Cultural Historian Maurizio Peleggi has argued that colonial hotels were ‘a foundational institution of European modernity’.³² Non-Europeans were not allowed in, other than as staff. The hotels were sites of colonial fantasy, an escape from the hot Asian outside for Europeans who dreamt of ‘home’ and for non-Europeans who were excluded. Although the Convent site is inherently colonial, the drawings suggest that the balance of power has changed – now it is the Singaporean who is relaxing among the gracious remnants of colonialism and waited on by European staff. Symbolically, rather than being in Chakrabarty’s imaginary ‘waiting room of history’, waiting to be considered sufficiently ‘modern’, Singaporeans have achieved this ‘European modernity’ for themselves.³³ There is a re-casting of the building, but also a recasting of the social.

Suggestions for appropriate use of the courtyards are also for dining, where ‘under the elegant archways, white wicker furniture with potted palms would bring home the charm of the tropics’, a scene again reminiscent of the colonial. Figure 21 below shows the large artist

³² Maurizio Peleggi, "The Social and Material Life of Colonial Hotels: Comfort Zones as Contact Zones in British Colombo and Singapore, ca. 1870-1930," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 1 (2012): 136.

³³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2003), 8.

impression of the possibilities for ‘pleasurable outdoor dining’, as well as a photograph of the actual cloisters and courtyard.



Fig. 21: Courtyard

Here we starkly see the contrast between the real present and the imagined future. The Convent cloisters and courtyard in the photograph look drab, deserted and neglected. Even when in use previously, the buildings and surroundings were generally spartan and utilitarian. The painting imagines the space almost as a pleasure garden, beautifully landscaped with colourful flowerbeds, palms, seats and a fountain. The outdoor restaurant has comfortable chairs, with tables covered with food. The food is European, as is the formal garden, and overall the painting has a French aristocratic ambience. It represents a ‘renaissance’ – a term used historically in a fundamentally European context. Yet the man comfortably lounging by the table is Asian. Again, it is Singapore imagining itself in very European terms.

We look from the drab photograph of the present to the colourful and serene imagined future. In many ways, this sums up the entire document, which, with the exception of the technical tender brief at the back, represents the attempt by the URA to frame the boundaries of future use of the site and to set the stage for the desired ambience of the development. So, in stark contrast to the actual state of the Convent site and buildings, we are told that ‘the serenity of the open field, with birds that have made this city-locked cloister their home make an ideal haven of comfort and relaxation for shoppers and tourists’. The future development is portrayed as an oasis in the city. It builds upon the other aspects of the imagined past – the silence of the chapel, the laughter of schoolgirls and the serenity of the Convent. In a city of constant change, it is portrayed as an oasis, a Utopia where time has stood still.

Where shops are identified as appropriate potential facilities, they are described as ‘exclusive, specialist shops’, ‘quaint little shops’, and ‘high value-added trade workshops for the repair of antiques, cultural artefacts, leather items and musical instruments’. They could also be ‘exclusive cafés for the trendy’. Here ‘trendy’ equates with modernity and with exclusivity. The ‘Underground Facilities’, potentially as large as 3,000 square metres and containing parking and more shops, are mentioned, and it is suggested that ‘this new aspect of the CHIJ could be a modern, clean counterpoint to the antique charms of the Convent’. Again, we see the interplay and juxtaposition of the old with the clean and modern of the new. ‘Modernity’ is new, clean and trendy, fitting with the aspirations of becoming a ‘global city of the arts’ and a ‘renaissance city’. Yet the developer must also be sensitive to the heritage of the site, so that the glimpses of the past are not completely erased. This represents, in concrete form, the dilemma for Singapore – how to ‘modernise’ in the quest for economic development, without destroying its heritage buildings and becoming another ‘bland’ globalised city.

The successful tender

In November 1990, the URA announced that three bids had been received.³⁴ A local consortium, Cloisters Investments Pte Ltd, later known as CHIJMES Investment Pte Ltd, was awarded the tender. They had bid \$26.8 million for the site, including the chapel.³⁵ Their plans included demolishing and rebuilding the dormitory; constructing a ten-metre deep courtyard, and using the remainder of the site, other than the chapel, for shops and restaurants.

³⁴ “Three bidders for CHIJ”, *Business Times*, 9 November 1990.

³⁵ Kong, Low and Yip, *Convent Chronicles*, 178.

A Conservation Consultant, Didier Reppelin, was engaged, and the work was overseen by the architectural firm Ong and Ong. Thirty-five thousand pieces of stained-glass were shipped to Belgium for restoration at the same workshop where they had been originally assembled.³⁶ The restoration proved to be more expensive than initially thought. By the time the complex opened in 1996 as CHIJMES, 100 million Singapore dollars had been spent on its restoration and development.³⁷

Architecturally, the restoration work won several awards: in 1997, the Aseanta Awards for Excellence – Best ASEAN Conservation Effort; also in 1997, the URA Architectural Heritage Award; in 1998, the 5th SIA Architectural Design Award – Conservation, and in 2002 a UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Award.³⁸ These awards point to a highly successful ‘adaptive re-use’ of the site. The response of the public, particularly by previous CHIJ ‘old girls’, was more mixed. A previous CHIJ student, Elsie Chia, who had been at the school from 1919 to 1929, was quoted in the *Straits Times* at the time of the CHIJMES opening in 1996 as saying, ‘it’s much better than before. But I feel that nothing has changed because the spirit of the old chapel is here’.³⁹ Her concern about retaining the ‘spirit’ of the chapel reflects the ongoing tension between adaptive reuse of buildings and the intangible memories and ‘feeling’ of a place. This was important at the time to many Singaporeans and, as we shall see in the Chapter Eight discussion of the Chapel Party, it has remained an ongoing issue.

Honours student Oh Yam Chew surveyed and interviewed a small number of ‘old girls’ in 1997–98.⁴⁰ He concluded that the perspectives of the alumni studied ‘revealed general approval of state conservation efforts’, although five of his respondents were ‘appalled’ by the commercial use of the site.⁴¹ At the other end of what he described as ‘purist conservation perspectives’, he quoted an ex-student who said:

I think that food and beverage outlets are the temples of today and I’m glad that its open to the public in such an accessible way ... I don’t want the ‘spirit’ to be

³⁶ Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 81.

³⁷ www.chijmes.com.sg/tourist_about.php, accessed 1 January 2014.

³⁸ www.chijmes.com.sg/tourist_about.php, accessed 1 January 2014.

³⁹ *Straits Times*, quoted in Meyers, *Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus*, 81.

⁴⁰ Oh Yam Chew, “Mission (im)possible : a study of CHIJMES and the Singapore Art Museum” (National University of Singapore, 1998), unpublished thesis. Oh surveyed 102 members of the public and CHIJ alumni, plus did 29 in-depth interviews of alumni of CHIJ and of the St Joseph’s Institution.

⁴¹ Oh, *Mission (im)possible*, iv and 106.

preserved if it means that people are excluded (in) the process. We live in a post-modern age and such stuffiness should be done away with.⁴²

In general, the alumni identified the target group for CHIJMES as ‘the young and trendy’, yuppies, the well-off, the upper-middle class and the tertiary and English educated.⁴³ One respondent said ‘the whole place reeks of snootiness ... the valet parking all contribute to the snob appeal of the place’.⁴⁴ This suggests that the aim of targeting a ‘refined’ user group may have been met, but may have operated as an impediment to its acceptance by ordinary Singaporeans. It is also at odds with the Convent practice of accepting all children left at the gate and, at least nominally, all potential students and worshippers. Kong has suggested that the best way to ‘make amends’ with those persons still aggrieved by the relocation of the school and the subsequent commercialisation of the Convent site would be to involve them in the CHIJMES activities, and ‘in so doing, CHIJMES as a commercial enterprise stands to benefit while old wounds heal’.⁴⁵ She noted that some celebrations in 2004 for the 150th anniversary of CHIJ in Singapore were held at CHIJMES, and the Alumni Association has used the facilities for its commemorative dinners.⁴⁶

In Chapter Eight I highlight the tenuous nature of this relationship as illustrated when the chapel was hired for a ‘Chapel Party’ with ‘dancing nuns’. The commercial nature of the complex now means that it is continually at risk of being seen as crassly exploiting the original religious function of the site or of changing it beyond recognition of its original use. The Hog’s Breath Cafe, another food outlet (now closed) appeared incongruous next to the chapel and Caldwell House. At times the advertising of businesses and events draws on the original religious use, as in this (unattributed) publicity material from one of the CHIJMES food outlets: ‘Our first visitors came seeking spiritual nourishment. Nowadays it’s the spaghetti marinara.’⁴⁷

The 2012 book *Conserving Domesticity* by architect Lilian Chee is a collection of photographs of buildings restored by the architectural firm, Ong and Ong, the same firm

⁴² Oh, Mission (im)possible, 106.

⁴³ Oh, Mission (im)possible, 117.

⁴⁴ Oh, Mission (im)possible, 117.

⁴⁵ Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future*, 204.

⁴⁶ Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future*, 204.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future*, 204. Unattributed publicity material from c2011 .

which undertook the restoration of the Convent and its transformation into CHIJMES.⁴⁸ The book comprises chapters on eight shophouses and a bungalow, described as ‘old on the outside’ and modern on the inside. Included among the shophouses and the bungalow – the domestic spaces – is a chapter on CHIJMES, with the focus almost wholly on the chapel. This initially seems an odd inclusion in a book which its back cover tells us is concerned with ‘the conserved domestic space ... a space marked by the passing of time associated with occupancy – cycles of moving in, starting a family, growing old and dying’. The book does not explain or justify the inclusion. Yet in many ways the Convent *was* a home and a domestic space. It was run by women; indeed it was a city of women and children, with a Mother Superior as its head. The absent father, the priest, visited as needed to lead the Mass. The Sisters, orphans and boarders lived there, ate and sewed there, and babies and toddlers played there. The decision by the Singapore government to take over the site and put it out to tender effectively moved it from the domestic to the commercial. Nonetheless, Chee’s words, again at first reading seemingly more apt for houses than the Convent, also apply: ‘In each conserved house, a new past is being created, and this past is already transmuting itself into a new future.’⁴⁹

Conclusion

The decision by the Singapore government in 1990 to lease the site for commercial uses has meant that these tensions are inevitable, requiring careful handling. There were other ways that the restoration could have been approached, rather than tendering the site out to the private sector. For example, the Abbotsford Convent in Melbourne, Australia was established by the French order of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in the 1860s and was one of the largest self-sufficient Convent and farm complexes in Australia. It was vacated in the 1970s, other than for a small part retained by the Order and including the chapel.⁵⁰ It was purchased by the Victorian State government in 1975 for use as a higher education institution, but in 1997 was earmarked to become a major residential development. The local community mobilised opposition and prevented this and it is now owned and run by a community trust as a community arts and crafts complex. It has a few small cafés and holds a Sunday market, but is not run as a commercial concern per se.

⁴⁸ Lilian Chee, *Conserving Domesticity* (Novato, CA: Three Sixty Review, 2012), 004.

⁴⁹ Chee, *Conserving Domesticity*, 022.

⁵⁰ See www.abbotsfordconvent.com.au, accessed 15 January 2015 and http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov/#detail_places;1, accessed 2 January 2014.

I have shown that the tendering out of the CHIJ site was a very Singaporean response to urban redevelopment, reflecting the shift to an appreciation of heritage conservation as an important part of the fabric of the city-state, but also the view that it must be economically viable and not a drain on the state. Despite some opposition from CHIJ alumni and others, the tender was issued and the tender document which I have examined in detail portrayed both an idealised past and an idealised future for the Convent site. The site became, in effect, part of the government's pragmatic push towards economic development and the aim of transforming Singapore into a modern global city. In the next chapter, I examine more broadly how Singapore is representing and remembering its past through its designation of National Monuments and argue that such monuments are used to both define, and to serve, the nation.

Chapter 7

Remembering the past: Choices

Introduction

In Chapter Five I examined the turn to heritage conservation in Singapore during the 1970s and 1980s and the enactment of the Preservation of Monuments Act in 1971. Chapter Six examined the government acquisition of the Convent site, its partial demolition, subsequent tendering out to private enterprise and the transformation into CHIJMES. During this period, the chapel and Caldwell House were designated National Monuments. Their designation acknowledged their historical role in the development of Singapore, but their inclusion as part of a private-sector commercial enterprise, with a focus on restaurants, bars and entertainment, is a particularly Singaporean approach. In this chapter, I explore the broader issues of national identity, how nations choose what aspects of their history to monumentalise and the choices made in Singapore, as reflected in their designation of national monuments and other heritage sites.

Historian James Loewen wrote that governments and elites know that history is power and therefore take the time to determine how history will be remembered.¹ Loewen drew up a list of ‘Ten Questions to Ask at a Historic Site’ to encourage visitors to think critically about the site by asking such questions as: who designated it and what were their ideological needs and social purposes? Who is left out? And is the presentation accurate?² I do not propose to answer these questions specifically for the Singapore situation but raise them to highlight the politicisation of historical sites. Broader questions about national identity have been raised by historian Richard White, drawing on Benedict Anderson’s conceptualisation of the nation as social construct, as ‘imagined political community’.³ White proposed that ‘when we look at ideas about national identity, we need to ask, not whether they are true or false, but what their

¹ James Loewen, *Lies across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 25-26.

² Loewen, *Lies across America*, 459.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed. (London: Verso, 2006. 1983).

function is, whose creation they are, and whose interests they serve’⁴ Designation of Caldwell House and the chapel as national monuments has served the function of preserving the buildings and thus muting the opposition to the CHIJMES development by groups such as the Alumni Association, as well as giving some measure of prestige to the development. It also, of course, assisted in achieving the urban redevelopment goals of moving the Sisters out of the city centre and building the MRT station and headquarters. An examination of national monuments in Singapore, then, also sheds light on the national narrative and the aspects of Singapore’s history that are considered ‘worthy’ of preservation. In this chapter, I am reading the Convent in the context of other monuments and buildings that have been preserved.

Managing colonial structures in a post-colonial world

The role of memory and national identity becomes more complex in countries with a colonial history. Historian Sabine Marschall, examining post-colonialism in several African nations, concluded that there have been a number of different approaches to heritage after independence.⁵ Those countries that have wanted to distance themselves from their colonial past have either attempted to recover and validate pre-colonial traditions and celebrate ethnic cultural values and beliefs, or have commemorated the attainment of independence and those who fought for it.⁶ In contrast, some countries with a remaining substantial white minority have tended to construct new post-independence memorials while leaving colonial heritage largely intact.⁷ Geographer John Western, however, has questioned whether the colonial city can truly be ‘undone’ after decolonisation, since ‘a city cannot be torn down totally to begin anew, because the colonial mold is literally set in stone’.⁸ He suggested that while certain symbols, such as statuary or street names can be easily changed, other symbols of empire are often simply ignored, removed or appropriated.⁹

⁴ Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), viii.

⁵ Sabine Marschall, "The heritage of post-colonial societies," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, ed. Brian Graham and Peter Howard (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

⁶ Marschall, "The Heritage of post-colonial societies": 353.

⁷ Marschall, "The Heritage of post-colonial societies": 351-352. For an examination of the complexities of this, see Albert Grundlingh, "A Cultural Conundrum? Old Monuments and New Regimes: The Voortrekker Monument as Symbol of Afrikaner Power in a Postapartheid South Africa," *Radical History Review* 81, no. 1 (2001).

⁸ John Western, "Undoing the Colonial City?," *Geographical Review* 75, no. 3 (1985): 344.

⁹ Western, "Undoing the Colonial City?": 344-347.

Post-colonial scholar Partha Chatterjee's examination of the various incarnations of a Calcutta monument to those who died in the 'Black Hole' – now moved and forgotten in an obscure church graveyard – suggests that even the same monument 'can be the vehicle for different stories, whose significance changes with different historical conditions and the political identity of those telling the story'.¹⁰ While Singapore has largely retained its colonial heritage, we can see Chatterjee's point played out in the history of the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles.

The statue was initially cast in bronze and erected on the Padang on Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee Day, 1887.¹¹ Its location in the centre of the Padang meant it was hit by footballs and used as a seat and vantage point for events, and so it was moved during the Centenary Celebration of 1919 to 'a more respectable location' in front of the Victoria Memorial Hall, surrounded by a semi-circular classical colonnade and a marble-lined pool. During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore in 1942, the statue was relegated to a storeroom in the museum, and there were rumours that it might be melted down for the Japanese war effort.¹² For the Japanese, this was a tangible indicator of the demise of British sovereignty. After the end of the war, the colonial authorities described the statue as having suffered a period of internment, like many Singaporeans, and its ceremonial re-erection in July 1946 became a metaphor for the return of the colonial administration from internment.¹³

The statue became vulnerable again during the turbulent years leading up to independence, when there were calls for it to be dumped into the Singapore River.¹⁴ Advice, however, from the head of the United Nations Assistance Team in 1960 was that Singapore needed to restore the trust of foreign investors, and so the retention of the Raffles statue became that token gesture of reassurance.¹⁵ It was returned to its former location outside of the Victoria Memorial Hall, minus its former colonnade. In 1972, a white polymarble copy of the statue was made for the 150-year celebration of Singapore's founding and placed at the side of

¹⁰ Partha Chatterjee, "The Colonial City in the Postcolonial Era," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2014): 25.

¹¹ For an overview of the statue's history, see Singapore Infopedia, 'Statue of Stamford Raffles', http://erources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_119_2005-01-13.html, accessed 7 May 2014.

¹² Singapore Infopedia, *Statue of Sir Stamford Raffles*.

¹³ Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), 73.

¹⁴ Constance Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819 - 2005*. 3rd ed. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 1.

¹⁵ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819 - 2005*, 281.

Empress Place at what is believed to have been Raffles's landing place. So today there are two identical, although differently coloured, statues of Raffles in close proximity to each other. Like Chatterjee's description of the changing significance of the 'Black Hole of Calcutta' monument, the various incarnations of Raffles's statue(s) have reflected its changing political fortunes and perceived value to nation-building.

Western suggested that how colonial relics are dealt with in post-colonial societies depends on whether the monument has truly been 'divested of its threat to the once-colonised'.¹⁶ Marschall noted that even some countries that initially rejected colonial vestiges in the emotion-charged years after independence, have mellowed over time to a more considered position.¹⁷ As I have previously examined, Singapore has incorporated colonialism into its 'story' and is relatively comfortable with its colonial past. In now examining historical monuments in Singapore, we will see that it reflects the sentiments in Marschall's conclusion to her study that 'post-colonial heritage, while officially positioned in ideological opposition to colonial heritage, is in reality often characterized by a complex and sometimes symbiotic interweaving with colonial heritage and memories'.¹⁸ In Singapore, this complexity is further complicated by the constant push towards the goal of the globalised city. The Convent too, was and is, in a sense already part of a globalised world because of the global reach of Catholicism.

Official custodians

When the Singapore government proclaimed the Preservation of Monuments Act in 1971, it also established the Preservation of Monuments Board, with the task of preserving historically and architecturally significant buildings.¹⁹ In July 2013, it was renamed the Preservation of Sites and Monuments (PSM) to 'more accurately reflect the division's expanded role of championing nationally significant heritage sites'.²⁰ Sitting within the National Heritage Board structure, it has responsibility for planning, research and publications; regulatory support to guide restoration, preservation and protection of sites and

¹⁶ Western, "Undoing the Colonial City?": 348.

¹⁷ Marschall, "The Heritage of post-colonial societies":349.

¹⁸ Marschall, "The Heritage of post-colonial societies":361.

¹⁹ Government of Singapore, *Preservation of Monuments Act*, 1971. See also www.nhb.gov.sg/NHBPortal/AboutUs/OurFamily/PreservationofSitesandMonuments/AboutPSM/AboutPreservationofSitesandMonuments, accessed 20 April 2014.

²⁰ National Heritage Board spokesperson, in Melody Zaccheus. "New Unit Plays Mediator on Heritage Issues: It Studies Impact of Development and Serves as Link between Govt, Activists." *Straits Times*, 26 Oct 2013.

national monuments; outreach to promote public interest and awareness; and advice to government on matters relating to the preservation of nationally significant sites and monuments.²¹

Under the Preservation of Monuments Act, the criteria for designation as a national monument are that it be of historic, cultural, traditional, archaeological, architectural, artistic or symbolic significance and national importance.²² These broad criteria give considerable flexibility to determine just what is designated. The first buildings were gazetted as monuments in 1973, and currently all but two are buildings. Buildings are obvious signifiers of heritage, even if contested, although, ironically, we can see the privileging of monumental heritage over living heritage in the designation of the Istana in the Kampong Glam area; it was designated a National Monument and then renovated and converted into the Malay Heritage Centre which opened in 2004. In the process of doing so, however, the descendants of Sultan Hussein Shah, who were living in the Istana, were evicted from their home.²³

The question arises as to why these buildings are described as ‘monuments’. Michel Foucault wrote about the significance of language and categorisation, the ‘fundamental codes of a culture’, which we use to determine ‘the order of things’.²⁴ The project of ordering, while central to colonialism, has also been central to Singapore’s post-colonial project. That is, inscribing the order of things – place, space, people, knowledge, architecture and so on – has been the cornerstone of Singapore’s developmentalism and a site where we can see a continuity between colonial and post-colonial regimes. Since language ascribes meaning, I suggest that the more common usage of ‘monument’ is in the form of something erected in memory of a person or event, often as a memorial after death. Frequently these are shrines, tombs or statues. There is a sense of mourning, and the monument acts to ‘freeze-frame’ a moment in time. It ‘archives’ the past, to use literary scholar John Phillips’ concept of ‘urban

²¹ NHB website, as above.

²² Singapore Government, *Preservation of Monuments Act*, section 4 (a).

²³ Brenda Yeoh, "The Global Cultural City? Spatial Imagineering and Politics in the (Multi)cultural Marketplaces of South-east Asia," *Urban Studies* 42, no. 5/6 (2005): 953. The press in Malaysia accused Singapore of attempting to erase part of its history, with the Istana the ‘last bastion of Malay Singapore’: see *Utusan Malaysia*, 13 May 1999.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970), Translated from the French, xx.

new archiving'.²⁵ The Singapore policy of adaptive reuse means that the buildings are both frozen in time and simultaneously updated, as is the case with CHIJMES.

Raffles Hotel and CHIJMES

Significantly, perhaps the most famous National Monument, and a tourist hot-spot, is the luxury colonial-era Raffles Hotel. First opened in 1887, Raffles Hotel soon became associated with elegant travel and dining, but by the 1980s it was looking shabby and was at risk of demolition.²⁶ A Singapore Tourist Board report, seeking ways to revive tourism, noted that 'Raffles Hotel is quite possibly more famous than Singapore itself'.²⁷ It concluded that 'it is still possible to return it to its former splendour and make it the national treasure it should be – the Crown Jewel of the visitor industry in Singapore'. Maurizio Peleggi has argued that there are two modalities at work in the monumentalisation of colonial-era hotels in Southeast Asia: firstly, architectural enhancement where the building is refashioned 'to achieve the semblance of historical authenticity; and secondly, a discursive authentication whereby foundational myths are forged to claim monumental status and to use as marketing tools'.²⁸ Both modalities are in play in the revitalisation of Raffles Hotel.

The hotel was first gazetted as a National Monument in 1987, the centenary year of its opening. The owners spent S\$160 million on restoration, deciding to return the hotel to what it had been in 1915, since it had been added to and altered substantially after that date. The year 1915 was also a very particular historical moment, representing the last high days of the colonial era before World War One and the subsequent slow decline of empire. The redevelopment of the hotel involved removing and replacing the 1920s ballroom, recreating the bar and billiard room and building a new wing to house shops, restaurants, the ballroom

²⁵ John Phillips, "Urban New Archiving," in *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity*, ed. Ryan Bishop, John Phillips, and Wei-Wei Yeo (London: Routledge, 2004).

²⁶ There have been numerous books and articles written on Raffles Hotel. See for example Chapter 9, "Raffles Hotel, Singapore" in Ashley Jackson, *Buildings of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁷ Ministry of Trade and Industry, *Tourism Product Development Plan*, 1986. Cited in Joan Henderson, "Conserving Colonial Heritage: Raffles Hotel in Singapore," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 17.

²⁸ Maurizio Peleggi, "Consuming Colonial Nostalgia: The Monumentalisation of Historic Hotels in Urban South-East Asia," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 46, no. 3 (December 2005): 255.

and a Victorian-style theatre.²⁹ It reopened in 1991 and was re-gazetted as a National Monument in 1995.

Raffles Hotel is a prime example of the government's heritage conservation policies of 'maximum Retention, sensitive Restoration and careful Repair', and of policies of 'for profit' private and public partnerships. A new wing was added to the hotel to blend with the original, functions were moved and recreated, a shopping arcade was included, and it has been restored not to its original time period of 1887, but to 1915. Despite its recreated grandeur, tourism scholar Joan Henderson has suggested that the hotel might be criticised 'for offering as authentic that which is fake', a 'staged authenticity'.³⁰ This very aspect was in fact highlighted in a poster of the hotel produced as part of the 'New Asia – Singapore' campaign launched in 1996 by the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board.³¹ The poster shows a photograph of Raffles Hotel lit up at night and asks: 'Can a city of the future still let you sleep in the past?'³² Significantly, it goes on to ask: 'Can a building *become more original the more it's improved?*' (my emphasis). Herein lies the very essence of the dilemma of heritage conservation in Singapore – its hybridity, which can so easily lead to a sense of the nation as theme park.³³

Like many other National Monuments, including those at CHIJMES, Raffles Hotel is also dwarfed by surrounding modern buildings. Although located on Beach Road, the policy of reclamation of land means that it is no longer near the sea. Historian Ashley Jackson wrote of his shock at drawing up outside of the hotel for the first time:

for a split second I failed to recognize it. My brain would not immediately compute, for the building before me ... looked like a miniature of the structure I know so well from photographs – like one of those two-third-sized facsimiles of famous buildings that used to be erected at British Empire exhibitions.³⁴

²⁹ Henderson, "Conserving Colonial Heritage":18. See also Gretchen Liu, *Raffles Hotel* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1992), 150-51.

³⁰ Henderson, "Conserving Colonial Heritage", 22. See also Dean MacCannell, "Staged authenticity: arrangements of social space in tourist settings," *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 3 (1973).

³¹ For a detailed analysis of the campaign, see T. C Chang and S. Y. Lim, "Geographical Imaginations of 'New Asia - Singapore'," *Geografiska Annaler* 86B, no. 3 (2004).

³² For a photograph of poster, see Jim Aitchison, *How Asia Advertises: The Most Successful Campaigns in Asia-Pacific and the Marketing Strategies Behind Them* (Singapore: Wiley, 2002), 403.

³³ As infamously described in William Gibson, "Disneyland with the Death Penalty," *Wired*, Sept/Oct 1993. See also Ian Buruma, "AsiaWorld," *New York Review of Books*, 12 June 2003.

³⁴ Ashley Jackson, *Buildings of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 173.

He commented that the newly-built additions to the hotel, even though done in matching style, amounted essentially to a very expensive shopping mall: 'Charming, arcaded, looking in on a courtyard – but a shopping centre nonetheless.' As he also pointed out, these new buildings also contain the relocated Long Bar, 'to which tourists flock, paradoxically, to evoke the colonial heyday'.³⁵ As Peleggi noted, while hotels such as Raffles recreate a 'colonial decor', or at least an imagined and improved colonial decor, 'colonialism' as a term never appears in promotional material because of its potential negative connotations.³⁶ Instead, a colonial nostalgia is invoked, free of unpleasant memories of imperialism, although as Peleggi also notes, 'old patterns are equally persistent as South-East Asians continue to serve (with a smile) a largely foreign clientele, making colonial nostalgia appear to be something more substantial than a figment of the imagination'.³⁷

Raffles Hotel as National Monument plays out in grand style many of the dilemmas common to other National Monuments in Singapore, including CHIJMES, particularly the tension between heritage conservation and adaptive reuse. Raffles Hotel and CHIJMES are within close walking distance of each other, both are privately owned and contain shops, and their renovation has included new wings built in the original style. Both use colonialism as a key part of their marketing strategy. They (more or less) allow people to play out a colonial fantasy. Historian Chris Hudson has argued that the Raffles branding is dependent 'on the reclaiming of Orientalism', drawing on tropes of an essentialised and exotic Orient which is now an object of consumption.³⁸

Just as the Long Bar is both 'real' and 'constructed', the chapel (now CHIJMES Hall) is also both 'religious' and 'secular'. Its architecture means that is clearly a former church and its popularity as a wedding reception venue reinforces this. The building has been deconsecrated, and the altar has been removed; yet, as I discuss in the next chapter, for those people familiar with Christian architecture and symbols, the altar is symbolically still present in its absence. It is clear where the altar was, or 'should be', and thus it acts as an invisible historical plaque to the former use of the building.

³⁵ Jackson, *Buildings of Empire*, 193.

³⁶ Peleggi, "Consuming Colonial Nostalgia":262.

³⁷ Peleggi, "Consuming Colonial Nostalgia":263.

³⁸ Chris Hudson, "Raffles Hotel Singapore: Advertising, Consumption and Romance," in *Reframing Singapore: Memory - Identity - Trans-Regionalism*, ed. Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Alijunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 252

Accentuating its original use as a place of worship, today there is a regular ‘CHIJMES Worship’ taking place in the chapel. The service is Christian, although not Catholic. A large screen displaying the words of the hymns stands where the altar originally stood, and the musicians (usually guitarists) stand in front of this virtual altar. Its website ‘invite(s) you to come and drink from this spiritual watering hole in the city’.³⁹ The image stands in contrast to the other ‘waterholes’ in the complex – the bars – and represents a deliberate playing with the commercial use of the space. This idea of the service as a quiet time of reflection, an ‘oasis’ in the city, is also similar to the imagined future for the Convent in the tender document that I analysed in Chapter Six, when the site was portrayed as ‘an ideal haven of comfort and relaxation for shoppers and tourists’. Again, the worship service is both a return to the original use of the building and also *not the same*. It is another example of adaptive re-use.

Other monuments

Not all National Monuments are adaptively re-used and some are more classical monuments. One of the two National Monuments that are not buildings is actually a group of Esplanade Park Memorials, gazetted jointly as a National Monument in December 2010 and comprising three different structures. The Tan Kim Seng Fountain is a nineteenth-century cast-iron fountain built in 1882 by the municipal council to commemorate the philanthropic contributions of a Straits Chinese businessman, Tan Kim Seng, who died in 1864. Tan was a leader of the Chinese community in Singapore who contributed to the Tan Tock Seng Hospital, built and endowed the Chinese Free School, and also donated \$13,000 to the colonial government to assist with the construction of the first reservoir and waterworks.⁴⁰ Tan was also the businessman who held the grand ball I discussed in Chapter Two and of whom a European guest, on seeing his ‘pig-tail, sharp features and Mongolian eyes’, only kept her ‘mirth under polite restraint’ with great difficulty.⁴¹

³⁹ www.chimes.com.sg/worship/, accessed 30 March 2015.

⁴⁰ Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819-2005*, 126.

⁴¹ Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Year's History of the Chinese in Singapore*. Reprint of 1923 ed. (Singapore: University Malaya Press, 1967. 1923. 1902), 47.

The other two memorials in the Esplanade Gardens are war memorials. The Cenotaph was originally erected to honour the 124 men from Singapore who died in World War One, and the commemoration of those who died in World War Two was subsequently added.⁴² The Lim Bo Seng Memorial was erected in 1953-54 from public donations to commemorate Lim Bo Seng who had fought in the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army during WWII and who died in Japanese captivity. It is the only such memorial in Singapore to an individual. The other war memorial to be proclaimed a National Monument is the Civilian War Memorial, erected in 1967 and gazetted as a national monument in August 2013. As I examined in Chapter Four, the needs of nation-building and the promotion of the government's multi-racialism policy meant that its design was modified from a memorial to the victims of the *sook ching* to one representing shared wartime suffering.

These more conventional monument types are not the most numerous in Singapore. As of June 2015, there were 69 gazetted National Monuments.⁴³ Religious buildings comprise almost half (31) of all monuments, with the largest sub-group being Christian. This is followed by official buildings, then a small number of commercial and non-commercial buildings, with just two former residences. All except four – the Civilian War Memorial, the Former Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House, the Chung Cheng High School and the Jurong Town Hall – were built in the colonial period. Henderson has suggested that the paucity of post-colonial buildings in the national monuments list and in conservation areas could reflect 'an uncertainty about what merits remembrance and celebration. Identifying in built form representations of special attributes and key events of a state less than 50 years old ... and which commonly defines itself in terms of economic advances, may pose difficulties'.⁴⁴ The designation of the Jurong Town Hall as a national monument in June 2015 may signify the beginning of a changing emphasis – it was built in 1975 and included as representing the early years of industrialization and the work of a pioneering group of local architects. Indeed at the time of gazettal, the Director of the PSM stated that the National Heritage Board had made a conscious decision to preserve buildings other than the colonial.⁴⁵

⁴² <http://www.nhb.gov.sg/places/sites-and-monuments/national-monuments/esplanade-park-memorials>, accessed 30 August 2015.

⁴³ <http://www.nhb.gov.sg/places/sites-and-monuments/national-monuments>, accessed 30 August 2015.

⁴⁴ Henderson, "Understanding and using built heritage":58.

⁴⁵ "Jurong Town Hall Will Be Gazetted as National Monument." *Straits Times*, 1 June 2015.

Conservation areas

The work of the PSM is complemented by that of the Urban Redevelopment Authority, which in addition to urban planning, has responsibilities to issue conservation guidelines, grant planning permission for restoration works and advise the Minister on gazetting areas for conservation.⁴⁶ The first ten conservation areas were gazetted in 1989 and covered the key central historic districts of Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam, Singapore River, Emerald Hill and Cairnhill, a process that included approximately 3,200 buildings. Today, there are over 100 conservation areas, covering more than 7,000 buildings.⁴⁷

The most high-profile of these areas are those marketed to international tourists as heritage districts, such as Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam. This ‘theming’ allows them to be promoted as opportunities to see and experience the authentic Singapore, a Singapore that is simultaneously cosmopolitan and traditional. These districts, however, have also been criticised as ‘newly invented “historic” cityscapes’, sanitised and artificial environments that seem more geared to tourists than to locals.⁴⁸ Geographer T. C. Chang examined Little India, which was designated a historic district in 1989, and showed that this had resulted in many traditional shops being priced out of the marketplace and the disappearance of itinerant sellers, thus ‘taming’ the area into a ‘showpiece’ with little use-value for its residents.⁴⁹ A 2007 newspaper article, ‘Spruce up Little India but keep its charm’, reported on plans by the URA to undertake improvements and noted that those interviewed ‘were quick to compare Little India to Chinatown, pointing out how (in Chinatown) the old street life and colour leached out, especially where pubs, bars and offices now occupy restored shophouses’.⁵⁰

The designated heritage districts are popular with tourists, but have also been generally criticised as artificial. Food scholars Jean Duruz and Gaik Cheng Khoo described the ‘Malay Village’, which operated for many years in the Kampong Glam area, as a ‘faux village’, promoting a ‘mythological past in fancy dress’, but that was simply another ‘site of

⁴⁶ www.ura.gov.sg/uol/about-us/our-work/protecting-identity.aspx, accessed 11 April 2014.

⁴⁷ <http://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/conservation/vision-and-principles/brief-history.aspx>, accessed 29 April 2014.

⁴⁸ Peleggi, “Consuming Colonial Nostalgia”: 257.

⁴⁹ T. C. Chang, “Theming Cities, Taming Places: Insights from Singapore.” *Geografiska Annaler, Series B, Human Geography* 82, no. 1 (2000): 35-54.

⁵⁰ “Spruce up Little India but keep its charm”, *Straits Times*, 10 April 2007: 1.

globalized capital'.⁵¹ Architect Imran bin Tajudeen has also criticised these districts, noting that the Kampong Glam Conservation District preserves only a remnant of the old port-town and that even in this remnant, former residents and shop owners have been 'evicted from the core areas of community life'.⁵² He pointed to the historically dynamic nature of the area in the past and noted also that Chinatown, now promoted as an exclusively Chinese area, was, in fact, also previously home to Tamil and Malay workers and merchants. For bin Tajudeen, this reflects a deliberate government policy – the narrative of Chinatown portrays the Chinese sacrifice as hard-working coolies in shophouses, while the Malay Heritage Centre and the former Malay Village portray Malays as 'living in rural isolation and traditionalist stagnation' before government intervention through public housing.⁵³ All of these examples of 'themed' districts illustrate the continuing dilemma of tourism promotion in Singapore, where tourists have 'effectively become a civil group and constituency'.⁵⁴ Economic imperatives can lead to a privileging of tourism over the local population and the potential for neither scenario to be wholly satisfactory. CHIJMES is located in the 'Colonial District' and, with its bars, restaurants and shops, is potentially at risk of a somewhat similar artificiality.

In the ongoing push to repackage Singapore's colonial past, the community campaign to save the old National Library building on Stamford Road in the late 1990s suggested there was a deep attachment to at least this one 'post-colonial' building. The National Library, constructed between 1957 and 1960, was one of the first public buildings erected during the years of elected self-government prior to independence. Geographers Roy Jones and Brian Shaw have suggested that the building 'was possibly unique in that it touched the common memory of *all* first-generation Singaporeans, devoid of colonial connotations and without regard for class, gender or ethnic divisions, it stood as a truly authentic symbol of a uniting nation'.⁵⁵ Despite the public campaign, however, the building was demolished in 2005 to make way for a road tunnel under Fort Canning Hill.

⁵¹ Jean Duruz and Gaik Cheng Khoo, *Eating Together: Food, Space, and Identity in Malaysia and Singapore* (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2015), 140.

⁵² Imran bin Tajudeen, "Beyond Racialized Representation: Architectural Linguae Francæ and Urban Histories in the Kampung Houses and Shophouses of Melaka and Singapore," in *Colonial Frames, Nationalist Histories*, ed. Madhuri Desai and Mrinalini Rajagopalan (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 238.

⁵³ bin Tajudeen, "Beyond Racialized Representation": 241.

⁵⁴ Ooi Can-Seng, "State - Civil Society Relations and Tourism: Singaporeanizing Tourists, Touristifying Singapore." *Sojourn* 20, no. 2 (2005): 249.

⁵⁵ Roy Jones and Brian Shaw. "Palimpsests of Progress: Erasing the Past and Rewriting the Future in Developing Societies - Case Studies of Singapore and Jakarta." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12,

As with the last days of the Convent, a public event was held on the last day of operation of the library.⁵⁶ The public were able to attend a commemorative ceremony, take photographs, go on a tour, and buy commemorative items. They could also participate in the 'My Fond Memories' contest and the 'Moments and Memories' photography contest. Some of the bricks from the original building were assembled into a wall in the garden of the new National Library building in Victoria Street. All that remains on the original site today are the two redbrick entrance pillars.

The building's fate, as Henderson has written, 'is a reminder of the strength of the urban development impetus and the primacy of commerce in Singapore'.⁵⁷ The continuing angst about the demolition of the library surfaces from time to time in newspaper articles and social media. In March 2007, for example, Siew Kum Hong, a Nominated Member of Parliament, wrote an article for *Today* newspaper, 'How important are those five minutes?'⁵⁸ It referred to the five minutes travelling time saved by drivers using the Fort Canning Tunnel and queried whether the cost-benefits justified the demolition of the library. Several letter writers responded and expressed regret that the library had been demolished, with some describing the library as a 'national icon' and its demolition a 'national tragedy'. One wrote:

Why do we seem to only preserve pre-war buildings when we should really be preserving buildings that were designed and built during the early days of our nationhood? These buildings might look plain compared to the old colonial edifices, but they carry in them the spirit and aspirations of a young nation struggling to find its footing in the world ... replacing the old with the new should not be our national reflex.⁵⁹

Another wrote: 'For Singaporeans who already have so little to anchor us to our homeland, we have lost an important icon ... It is a costly mistake in terms of nation-building'.⁶⁰

no. 2 (2006): 122-38. See also Kwok Kian Woon, Ho Weng Hin, and Tan Kar Lin, *Between Forgetting and Remembering: Memories and the National Library* (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000).

⁵⁶ Janice Ong, "Commemorating the Closing Chapter of the National Library at Stamford Road," *CDNLAO Newsletter* 51 Nov(2004).

⁵⁷ Joan Henderson, "Conserving Colonial Heritage: Raffles Hotel in Singapore." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 7-24:59.

⁵⁸ Siew Kum Hong, "How important are those five minutes?", *Today*, 12 March 2007, 21.

⁵⁹ Letter from Tan Chek Tee, "Relook criteria for conservation", *Today*, 15 March 2007.

⁶⁰ Letter from Lyndis Kang, "It's a costly nation-building error", *Today*, 15 March 2007.

In contrast, the Sun Yat Sen Villa was explicitly used to do the work of nation-building by its transformation into the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, restored and officially opened in 2001 as ‘a cultural shrine for all ethnic Chinese Singaporeans’.⁶¹ Historians Jianli Huang and Lysa Hong have argued that the renovation was designed by the government to show that Singapore had played an historic role in the making of modern China – that is, as ‘a pre-existing Singapore nation-state projected backwards in time, already inhabited by fully formed Chinese-Singaporeans committed to modernity and to making sacrifices for the advancement of China, the Chinese community in Singapore and ultimately Singapore itself’.⁶² The building had been declared a National Monument in 1994 but the 2001 makeover sought to widen its significance to the history of the region and to China.

A bid for world recognition: The Singapore Botanic Gardens

If the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall was a bid to be a ‘Big Singapore’, so too was the initiative to have the Singapore Botanic Gardens recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as a World Heritage Site. The nomination was submitted initially in December 2012, followed by a public consultation and then, in January 2014, with the formal and detailed nomination dossier.⁶³ The nomination was successful and the Gardens have become the first World Heritage site in Singapore. In a sense one might say that it is national identity formation and recognition writ large on the global scene, recognition that Singapore is a place of world importance.

It is also a reminder of the centrality of colonialism to the nation-state. Raffles had established a botanical and experimental garden on Government Hill in 1819 but it was closed ten years later. The Singapore Botanic Gardens were established in the present site in Tanglin in 1859.⁶⁴ The botanic garden was a model used by Britain across the Empire, with the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew at the centre. Gardens were established to grow plants for research and conservation as well as for a public enjoyment and education. They were also experimental sites for the cultivation of trees and plants that might prove profitable crops for

⁶¹ Huang Jianli and Lysa Hong, "History and the Imaginaries of 'Big Singapore': Positioning the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 1 (2004): 65.

⁶² Huang and Hong, "History and the Imaginaries of 'Big Singapore'", 75.

⁶³ Singapore National Commission for UNESCO, *Singapore Botanic Gardens: Candidate World Heritage Site Nomination Dossier* (January 2014).

⁶⁴ For a more detailed account, see Emma Reisz, "City as Garden: Shared Space in the Urban Botanic Gardens of Singapore and Malaysia, 1786-2000." Chap. 6 In *Postcolonial Urbanism: Southeast Asian Cities and Global Processes*, edited by Ryan Bishop, John Phillips and Wei-Wei Yeo. 123-50 (New York: Routledge, 2003).

consumption locally or in Britain, or for trade with other countries.⁶⁵ The Singapore Government's submission to UNESCO is quite explicit about this, stating that 'Colonial botanic gardens, such as Singapore Botanic Gardens, were the "Nurseries of Empire"—enabling dominance both practically and ideologically in an era where botanical research was at the forefront of scientific enquiry and a driving force in the world economy'.⁶⁶ They were, of course, 'nurseries of Empire' in the larger sense of demonstrating the imperial power to order the landscape and make it more familiar to British eyes.⁶⁷

These two themes are evident in the UNESCO application, which was submitted for consideration in the 'cultural' category. Under criterion (ii), it cites the plant research carried out in the Botanic Gardens, which has had a 'fundamental influence on the social and economic development of the region'. The research work at the Gardens was, for example, instrumental in introducing and developing rubber cultivation in the region.⁶⁸ The application also argued the case for acceptance under Criterion (iv), since the Gardens are 'a unique example of a British colonial tropical botanical garden'. The application noted the role of the Gardens in contributing to Lee Kuan Yew's Garden City initiative and to its current popularity for locals and tourists, but much of the evidence relates to the colonial period. It notes the historic buildings and structures on the site, again all from the colonial period: Swan Lake Gazebo (1850s), Burkill Hall (1868), Ridley Hall (1882), EJH Corner House (1910), Holtum Hall (1921) and the Bandstand (1930).

In the UNESCO submission, we see again the almost seamless connection between the colonial past and the post-colonial present. Yet this connection is not entirely seamless. Historian Emma Reisz has written that 'Singapore's botanic garden, like Chinatown and the Raffles Hotel, survives partly as a historic theme park, where the selective packaging and marketing of the past emphasizes the modernity of the present'.⁶⁹ In the ever-changing built environment of Singapore, the Botanic Gardens now stand in stark contrast to the ultra-modern twenty-first century Gardens By the Bay complex with its 16-storey-high man-made

⁶⁵ Jackson, *Buildings of Empire*: 93-95.

⁶⁶ Singapore National Commission for UNESCO, *Singapore Botanic Gardens*, 100-101.

⁶⁷ Emma Reisz, "City as Garden: Shared Space in the Urban Botanic Gardens of Singapore and Malaysia, 1786-2000." Chap. 6 In *Postcolonial Urbanism: Southeast Asian Cities and Global Processes*, edited by Ryan Bishop, John Phillips and Wei-Wei Yeo. 123-50 (New York: Routledge, 2003): 130.

⁶⁸ Lucile Brockway, "Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens," *American Ethnologist* 6, no. 3 (1979): 459.

⁶⁹ Reisz, "City as Garden": 124.

Supertrees. In a similar way, CHIJMES can be said to exhibit a ‘selective packaging and marketing of the past’, with its bars and restaurants ‘emphasising the modernity of the present’, standing now in contrast to the modern high-rise shopping centres around it.

Marked Historical Sites

Moving from the world stage to the local again, there are now over eighty Marked Historic Sites in Singapore which are acknowledged as such by the PSM. They are considered places of national significance, marking an ‘important event or personality commemorated at the site to serve as reminders of our history’.⁷⁰ Each site is marked by a plaque or heritage marker detailing the history of the site. A significant number are from the World War Two period, such as Changi Beach and the Kempeitai East District Branch, both locations where many civilians were killed. Others are educational facilities, reservoirs and civic and religious buildings. The Convent’s Gate of Hope is one of these.

Tellingly, many plaques mark buildings that have been demolished, or, as the website notes, ‘for some of these sites, the building may not be around anymore, as they are not gazetted buildings, unlike national monuments’. The plaque stands *instead* of the object or building, reminiscent of Loewen’s observation that in such instances, the plaque offers something to see, a way to connect with the event.⁷¹ This is the case with one of the sites, the rocks known as Batu Berlayer, the Dragon’s Teeth Gate or Lot’s wife, which had stood at the gateway of Keppel Harbour, but which were literally blown up in 1848 by the Straits Settlements Surveyor to widen the harbour entrance.⁷² Other buildings were demolished as part of the urban renewal policies of the 1970s and 1980s as outlined in Chapter Five.

The National Theatre is another example of a building demolished in this period but which still resonates today. It opened in August 1963, following a design competition and the supplementation of government funding by monies raised from the public who could ‘buy’ a brick for a dollar. Figure 22 below shows the theatre in the 1960s.

⁷⁰ [www.nhb.gov.sg/NHBPortal/Places/Historic Sites](http://www.nhb.gov.sg/NHBPortal/Places/Historic%20Sites), accessed 23 January 2015.

⁷¹ Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 27.

⁷² NHB website.



Figure 22: National Theatre

Source: National Archives of Singapore

It was built to commemorate the onset of self-government in 1959, although as architectural historian Raymond Quek has pointed out, the problem with the nomenclature was with the condition of the ‘nation’ at the time – that is, the government was attempting to develop a national identity before Singapore was actually an independent nation.⁷³ The design brief suggested that it might be ‘possibly Malayan in character’, and, ironically, its opening in August 1963 occurred in the same month as the commencement of the short-lived merger with Malaya.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the theatre continued as a major venue for international performances, concerts and National Day rallies until it was demolished in 1986. Ostensibly demolished because of structural problems with the roof and because of a fall-off in attendances due to the lack of air-conditioning, it was also, like the Convent, in the path of construction of the new MRT network. Today the empty grassed area where the theatre once stood is a ‘historic site’ and is marked with the blue marker plaques of the PSM.

The National Theatre was symbolically recreated as an art installation for the Singapore Biennale 2013. Architect Lai Chee Kien constructed an installation of the distinctive facade of the theatre, which had represented the stars on the Singaporean flag, and, in reference to the 50 years since the original was built, titled it ‘National Theatre @ 50’. It was funded by the artist, who also raised money by giving copies of paper bricks to those who donated, echoing the original fund-raising campaign. Additionally, many Singaporeans sent him old tickets and programs, as well as photographs of themselves in front of the theatre, indicating a continued affection for the building. The 40-metre steel model was installed in a green

⁷³ Raymond Quek, "Dramatic Pre-emption in Singapore's National Theatre: Constructing National Identity before an independent nation," *National Identities* 14, no. 3 (2012): 5.i

⁷⁴ Quek, "Dramatic Pre-emption in Singapore's National Theatre": 9.

space opposite the site of the original theatre. Figure 23 below shows the front of the installation.



Figure 23 National Theatre @ 50 installation, Singapore Biennale 2013
Source: Singapore Biennale 2013 program

Behind the facade, and not shown in the photograph, was a small stage, on which a poetry reading was performed on the theme of Memories and Lost Spaces.

I suggest that there is a level of angst felt by many Singaporeans about the loss of buildings that were never designated officially as national monuments, but which have significance to locals – a cultural memory that is intangible but present. In another example, architect and artist Peter Chen composed fourteen ‘Postcards from the Disposable City’ in 2012–13, showing ‘favourite landmarks ... in different states of stasis or disappearance’.⁷⁵ Figures 24a and 24b below show his postcards of the only remains of the demolished National Library (the gates) and the demolished National Theatre (the historical plaques on the empty site).

⁷⁵ Peter Chen, “Postcards from the Disposable City”, www.postcards-city.com, accessed 2 July 2014.

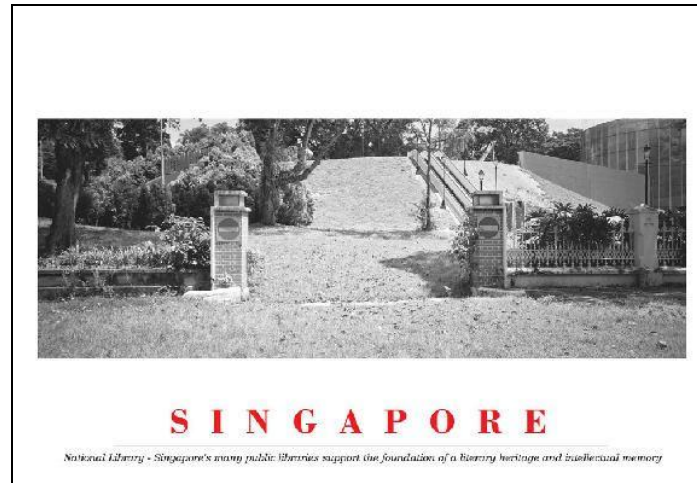


Figure 24a Peter Chen – Postcard – National Library
Source: www.postcards-city.com



Figure 24b Peter Chen – Postcard – National Theatre
Source: www.postcards-city.com

Chen mailed stamped, blank postcards of the fourteen sites to 1,000 random recipients and asked the recipients to return the postcards to him with their personal memories. Some respondents to the postcards showing the library and theatre were unsure what or where the sites were, but others included comments such as:

‘Some wounds heal slowly’ (Library)

‘My memories of the place all gone up in smoke – our simple pleasures of the past have all been wiped out ... no memories for my children and grandchildren’(Theatre)

‘1 word: irony – such a building of national importance (commemorating Singapore independence) should be preserved ... but ended up being demolished with nothing but a marker to indicate what it was ...’ (Theatre)

‘Space stolen from our young’ (Theatre)

‘I just felt that Singapore has a space that is used for nothing but money’
(Theatre)⁷⁶

Similar sentiments about the loss of the theatre were expressed in the 2011 poem, ‘National Theatre’, by poet Boey Kim Cheng:

In the lost photograph the National Theatre
stands, its five spires rising above
the crescent-boat fountain and its aqueous ribbons
sparkling in the late 60s sun,
to salute the nation's birth, and mark
the year it severed the cord
to the Peninsula, and sailed down
the long chute to the future of leaping towers
jostling to own the country's sky...

A dollar a brick to build;
the rickshaw man, the samsui woman, the street
hawkers, teachers, clerks and children
pooled their blood money to raise
the gleaming Art Deco edifice.⁷⁷

In all of the above, there is a palpable sense of a loss of attachment to place. Reporter Classisa Oon, in her *Straits Times* article in December 2011, ‘The Past is just a Memory’,⁷⁸ suggested there is a growing ‘sense of irretrievable loss amid the gains’. ‘Call it the pull of nostalgia or search for the nation’s unchanging soul, it is a tide of emotion that can no longer be content with just technological progress.’ She suggested that times have changed since the demolition of the National Library and National Theatre in the sense that now there is more of a public debate and outcry about heritage conservation, as evidenced by current public opposition to the government’s plans to demolish the Bukit Brown cemetery.⁷⁹ This contrasts

⁷⁶ Quotes taken from the 15 returned postcards of the National Library and 25 of the National Theatre, posted on www.postcards-city.com.

⁷⁷ Boey Kim Cheng, "National Theatre," *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* 10, no. 4 (2011). For an examination of the samsui women, see Kelvin Low, *Remembering the Samsui Women: Migration and Social Memory in Singapore and China* (Vancouver: UBC, 2014).

⁷⁸ Clarissa Oon. "The Past Is Just a Memory: Heritage Issues and Conservation Loomed Large in 2011 as Singaporeans Reeled from the Erosion of Personal Space." *Straits Times*, 2011.

⁷⁹ Huang Jianli. "Resurgent Spirits of Civil Society Activism: Rediscovering the Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore." *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 87, no. 2 (2014).

with the relatively limited opposition in the 1980s to the demolition of some Convent buildings and the commercial reuse of the site.

Yet, heritage conservation in Singapore still seems precarious in a constantly changing globalised city, and, as I have argued, is at risk of creating an artificial and ‘imagined’ past for the consumption of tourists. Sociologist Selvaraj Velayutham, commenting on the concept of nation as ‘home’, has argued that for Singaporeans, ‘a sense of homeliness is continually undermined by government interventions to “museumize” ethnic differences and districts, to remove and sterilize “memory places”, and to undermine the sorts of organic “we-ness” that emerges with hybrid cultural products such as Singlish’.⁸⁰ He also argued that the ‘historical imagination of Singapore’s past and present is entrenched in a discourse of a transitional narrative – a path towards progress’.⁸¹ Tellingly, we can see this in the Education Kits the PSM issues for school children. The kits include activities such as looking at monuments and identifying why they have been chosen for conservation. One of the tasks asks the students to ‘imagine a scenario that all buildings within 5 km of your school will be demolished with the next 10 yrs’ and asks ‘which would you save?’ That this is considered to be a realistic scenario says a lot about the continuing rate of change in the built environment in Singapore and the consequent fragility of heritage conservation. Given the policy of adaptive reuse, perhaps the children should be asked which buildings they would repurpose, and how.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the designation of national monuments and historical sites in Singapore and their significance in nation-building. The high proportion from the early colonial period demonstrates that Singapore has largely incorporated the colonial experience into its national story. Where colonial buildings have been adapted for modern uses, many have been re-used as significant historical and cultural museums. Reverting to its colonial links, the application for World Heritage status for the Botanic Gardens is an attempt to write national history on the world stage. Many monuments and sites are from the traumatic period of Japanese Occupation during World War Two, a period that I have previously argued has come to be seen as pivotal to Singapore’s later emergence from colonialism. The relatively

⁸⁰ Selvaraj Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nature, Culture and Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2007), 150.

⁸¹ Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization*, 97.

small number of post-independence monuments and sites may reflect a greater uncertainty about what is 'historic' and should be memorialised. Adaptive reuse of buildings can act as a bridge between the two periods – the colonial and post-colonial – but is not always a strong one.

The turn to heritage conservation since the 1980s has been significant and continuing. Yet as I demonstrated above, many Singaporeans grieve the loss of old landmarks and neighbourhoods in the continuing pragmatic push for the ever-evolving global city. Government initiatives, such as the Singapore Memory Project, which aims to collect five million digital memories of Singapore by 2015 and has as its tagline 'Giving Your Past a Present', cannot bring back the buildings or streetscapes that have been lost.⁸² At best, they stand, like Loewen's historical markers, *instead* of the actual buildings and neighbourhoods.

Even when protected by designation as a National Monument, the government's policy of adaptive reuse of heritage building means that substantial changes can and do occur. The Convent, now CHIJMES, has been protected by the designation of Caldwell House and the chapel as National Monuments. But the government policy of adaptive re-use by the private sector means that the level of protection does not extend to a total prohibition on physical changes, as evidenced by the physical changes to the Convent site that occurred when the MRT headquarters was constructed on the site, the changes made after the tender was awarded, the changes to the Convent walls in 2013 and the 2014–2015 modifications that I discuss further in the next chapter when I look at how the Convent is remembered today.

⁸² See Gene Tan, "Giving Your Past a Present: The Gift of Remembering," *BiblioAsia* 8, no. 3 (2012). Also www.singaporememory.sg, accessed 3 July 2014.

Chapter 8

Remembering the Convent

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that the preservation of heritage sites has become increasingly important to Singaporeans, being in part a response to concerns that the ‘real’ Singapore was being lost in the transformation to a ‘global’ city. This chapter explores how the past, and specifically the Convent, is memorialised in a broader sense. I examine the relatively new CHIJ Museum, established in 2012 in the CHIJ Secondary School in Toa Payoh, Singapore and argue that it functions as a preserver of the CHIJ community’s official cultural memory. I then look at other acts of remembering that complement and reinforce that cultural memory. I look briefly at the ‘Those Catholic School Days’ walking tour held in November 2012 as part of Monument Open House 2012, and also examine the November 2012 exhibition ‘Quill’ and the associated book of the same name which celebrate the 350th anniversary of CHIJ schools worldwide.¹ In examining this range of ways in which the history and memory of the Convent are displayed today, I show how these varied acts of remembering work to position the Convent as a key institution in the development of colonial Singapore, as well as being an important education provider contributing to the development of Singapore today.

I then move to the CHIJMES site itself to see what traces of the Convent’s past remain and how the Convent is remembered there. I argue that glimpses of the original purpose are faint, but I employ the concept of a building as palimpsest to suggest that under the new re-purposing, layers of memory of the original usage remain. I propose that we can see this played out in the strong community opposition to a planned Chapel Party, which was scheduled to be held in the CHIJMES chapel on Easter Saturday 2012. I argue that reuse of a building does not necessarily erase memories of its former purpose. The Chapel Party, and also, I argue, the 2013 remodelling of the Convent external walls bring these issues of re-

¹ Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, *Quill: Convent of the Holy infant Jesus 1662-2012* (Singapore: Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, 2012).

purposing and memory into tension, and demonstrate the ambiguous position of heritage conservation in a nation which privileges economic development.

Museums

To examine the ways the Convent is memorialised today, it is useful to start with the broader context of museums as the formal sites of collections and repositories of memory. Collecting, both formal and informal, had, of course, taken place throughout Asia for centuries. And at the time when the Raffles Museum was being planned in Singapore, the Chinese merchant Whampoa had a house full of ‘curiosities and rarities’, which was often visited by Europeans passing through the settlement.² Nonetheless, Singapore’s history as a British colony, as well as its reappropriation of its colonial past, suggest that the most useful and relevant approach to examining museums in Singapore is to start with a look at the development of museums within the European context.

The origin of the European museum is considered to date from the fifteenth century, with the building of the Medici Palace. This was at a time when increased travel and exploration made collecting a wide variety of items feasible.³ By building the Palace to display their collections, the Medici family demonstrated its knowledge of the classics and their new wealth and dominant status in Florence, so that the building ‘constituted both a major political decision and a new form of power’.⁴ By the end of the sixteenth century, collections or ‘museums’ were common across Europe. Indeed, Paula Findlen described the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a time when collecting became ‘an activity of choice’ among the social and educated elite.⁵ Collectors were ‘no longer controlled by theology and not yet controlled by science’.⁶ Often an eclectic range of rare and astonishing items was brought together to produce a ‘cabinet’, a representation of the world.⁷ Possession of such cabinets of curiosity conferred prestige on the owner, since the objects were ‘intelligible only to those with the time, inclination and cultural training to be able to decipher the relationship in which each

² Gretchen Liu, *One Hundred Years of the National Museum Singapore 1887-1987* (Singapore: National Museum Singapore, 1987), 18.

³ Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: California University Press, 1994), 3.

⁴ Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), 24.

⁵ Findlen, *Possessing Nature*: 3.

⁶ Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 77.

⁷ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 78.

object stands to the whole'.⁸ In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the classificatory principles governing the arrangement of exhibits embraced the Enlightenment ideas of scientific rationality, and there was a new aim to educate all who came to view them.⁹ By the mid-seventeenth century, museums had become incorporated into scientific organisations such as the Royal Society in England.¹⁰ As I argued in Chapter Two, we can see the Enlightenment ideas of progress, science and order played out in colonial Singapore in various ways, and we can see this also in relation to collecting and museums.

Stamford Raffles was an avid collector. While in Java as Lieutenant-Governor, he sent specimens and ethnographic material back to the British East India Company museum in London, and also published his two-volume *History of Java*.¹¹ He later returned to England with a large collection of artefacts. His intention was to show his collection to scholars and scientific societies 'back home' and so further his reputation as a man of science.¹² Historian Tim Barringer has asserted that 'the procession of objects from peripheries to centre symbolically enacted the idea of London as the heart of empire', and that the acquisition of objects and their ordering and display in museums constituted 'a three-dimensional imperial archive'.¹³ Museumologist Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, also drawing on these concepts, argued that the collections of early travellers 'concretised their maps', and that the establishment of collections is a form of symbolic conquest.¹⁴ Material culture as symbolic conquest resonates in the Singapore context because of its colonial origins.

The procession of objects from the colonies to London symbolically enacted the idea of Empire, but so, too, did the modelling of colonial museums on the British Museum, 'if not in size, then at least in concept'.¹⁵ In 1823, on his third and last visit to Singapore, Raffles set in place the beginnings of the Singapore Institution, which was to be a school for the 'sons of

⁸ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995), 41.

⁹ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 41. See also Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1992), 31. Also Jesus Pedro Lorente, *Cathedrals of Urban Modernity: The First Museums of Contemporary Art, 1800-1930* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

¹⁰ Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 4.

¹¹ Thomas Stamford Raffles, *History of Java*, 2 vols. (London: Black, Parbury & Allen, 1817).

¹² Liu, *One Hundred Years of the National Museum Singapore*, 15.

¹³ Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, eds., *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 11. See also Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London & New York: Verso, 1993).

¹⁴ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 18.

¹⁵ Iola Lenzi, *National Museum of Singapore Guide* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet and National Museum of Singapore, 2007), 24.

the highest order of natives and others', and would incorporate a library and museum.¹⁶ The project faltered, but the Raffles Museum was finally established in 1849. Many items in the early collections were donated or sold to the museum by other European explorers, missionaries, military men and civil servants, but local Southeast Asian men and women also made substantial donations of objects, often of family heirlooms.¹⁷ The Raffles Museum was transferred to the government in 1874, and in 1882 it was agreed to build a new purpose-built home for the museum. In typical British colonial architectural style, and reminiscent of the British Museum in London, the new building was domed and pillared in neo-Palladian style.

Benedict Anderson examined the role of the museum in British colonialism generally, and argued that the census, the map and the museum together 'profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion – the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry'.¹⁸ This colonial use of museums was challenged in many former colonies after the collapse of empires following World War Two. In Singapore, the intention to re-orient the museum into more of a 'national' museum was outlined in a 1960 speech by Yusof bin Ishak, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State), in the Singapore Legislative Assembly in 1960. He described the aim as being to

make (the museum) more representative of local customs and traditions. There will be more stress on the wealth of cultural material out of which we hope to weave a Malayan culture. It will emphasise more the history and contributions that the many races have made towards the creation of modern Singapore.¹⁹

In these years of limited self-government, there was an increased emphasis in the museum on science and industry, as well as public education, so that it could 'stimulate patriotism, public-spiritedness and the importance of increased productivity'.²⁰ Here we see played out the integral role of museums in nation-building. Hooper-Greenhill asserted that they symbolise and sustain national bonds by portraying the nation as cultured, inclusive and

¹⁶ Liu, *One Hundred Years of the National Museum Singapore*, 14.

¹⁷ Megan Osborne, "Early Collectors and Their Impact on the Raffles Museum and Library," *The Heritage Journal* 3(2008).

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed. (London: Verso, 2006. 1983), 164.

¹⁹ Speech to the Legislative Assembly by Yusof bin Ishak, *Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates*, Vol. 13, 20 July 1960, col. 24. Quoted in Kevin Tan, "The National Museum as Maker and Keeper of Singapore History," in *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History*, ed. Loh Kah Seng and Liew Kai Khiun (Singapore: Ethos Books and Singapore History Society, 2010), 124.

²⁰ Tan, *The National Museum as Maker and Keeper of Singapore History*, 125. Quote is from the Presidential Address of President Yusof Ishak, 6 May 1968.

paternal.²¹ The sudden independence of Singapore as a sovereign nation in 1965 meant that the national institutions were a key part of nation-building; hence, in 1969, the museum was formally renamed the National Museum of Singapore.

Internationally, the 1960s were a time when Museum Studies developed as an academic field. Museumologist Andrew McClellan, in his review of museum studies, referred to the strong debts owed to critical theorists such as Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu and Edward Said.²² He noted that the early phase of museum studies in the 1960s attacked museums as instruments of state authority and elite influence.²³ Then in the 1980s and 1990s, McClellan argued, critics exposed museum practices and narratives as culturally constructed, while in the 1990s, there were also concerns about increased commercialism and the restitution of artefacts to former colonies.²⁴ The ‘tidal wave of studies’ and ‘museum wars’, as historian Randolph Starn has characterised them, ‘constantly remind us that museums are not neutral. While they collect and conserve, classify and display, research and educate, they also deliver messages and make arguments’.²⁵

The development of museum studies as a field has led to much more attention on what is displayed (and what is not displayed), how it is displayed, how it is labelled and how the visitor understands it. Art historian Carol Duncan has described the museum as ‘a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance’.²⁶ The museum’s sequenced spaces and the way it arranges its objects, lighting and architecture ‘provide both the stage set and the script’.²⁷ Art critic John Berger, in his influential work *Ways of Seeing*, demonstrated that vision is socially constructed and that the words we put next to images affect how we understand that image.²⁸ Hooper-Greenhill argued that treating museums as visual discourses enables the questioning of the relationships between looking, knowledge and power.²⁹ She maintained that displayed objects ‘are made meaningful according to the interpretive frameworks within which they are placed, and the historical or cultural position from which

²¹ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 25.

²² Andrew McClellan, "Museum Studies Now," *Art History* 30, no. 4 (2007): 566.

²³ McClellan, "Museum Studies Now," 566.

²⁴ McClellan, "Museum Studies Now," 566-567.

²⁵ Randolph Starn, "A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies," *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 1 February (2005): 70-71.

²⁶ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1-2.

²⁷ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, p. 12.

²⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972).

²⁹ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 14.

they are seen'.³⁰ Even the descriptive labelling of items in museums becomes significant, since 'there is no possibility of producing texts that do not do ideological work'.³¹ For Hooper-Greenhill and others, 'the interpretation of visual culture has political implications' and 'relations of gender, ethnicity and class become embedded within the structures of collections'.³²

McClellan concluded his review of museum studies by noting that museums are much more diverse today, promote greater access, have adopted more reflexive practices in hanging and labelling, have a greater range of temporary exhibitions and are increasingly using art forms such as video, installation and performance.³³ Hooper-Greenhill acknowledged, indeed encouraged, the new technologies and practices of the post-modern museum, but cautioned that they should not be accepted uncritically, since even when multiple perspectives are offered,

newly pleasurable technologies of discipline and control have evolved to soften the contradictions and to disguise the inequalities. The total experience (in living history or interactive exhibits), the total immersion (in gallery workshops and events), can have the function ... of soothing, of silencing, of quieting questions, of closing minds.³⁴

In this same vein, museumologist Tony Bennett applied Michel Foucault's concepts of the 'disciplinary society' and the 'archaeology of knowledge' to the museum. Foucault had argued that 'governmentality' is a mechanism by which the state governs the conduct of individuals and populations at every level.³⁵ Bennett argued that museums embody a new articulation of knowledge and power, 'a power made manifest not in its ability to inflict pain but by its ability to organize and coordinate an order of things and to produce a place for the people in relation to that order'.³⁶ Bennett's point regarding order and control is heightened in the Singapore context. Singapore scholars have been consistently concerned with issues related to the hegemony of the state, that is, the social control exercised formally and

³⁰ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 8-9.

³¹ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 118.

³² Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 8.

³³ McClellan, "Museum Studies Now," 567.

³⁴ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 214.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," *Ideology and Consciousness* 6(1979).

³⁶ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*: 67. Although Lord has argued that Foucault has been used to promote a negative view of museums, and that the museum has the potential to enact Foucault's genealogy and to contribute to progress: see Beth Lord, "Foucault's Museum: Difference, Representation and Geneology.," *museum and society* 4, no. 1 (2006).

informally by the Singapore government in many levels of society.³⁷ I have previously examined ‘The Singapore Story’, the officially sanctioned history of the nation, taught in all schools and in which major historical episodes were carefully re-evaluated to emphasise particular values, and also Lee Kuan Yew’s autobiography which conflated Singapore’s history with his own. Historian Nicole Tarulevicz wrote that the PAP has always accepted a version of events that includes colonisation, since colonialism is an essential part of its rhetoric about economic development, and that ‘linking Raffles and Lee affects how history is seen; progress becomes central and a linear narrative is established’.³⁸

Many of these themes play out in Singapore’s museums today. With the exception of the relatively new ArtScience Museum that opened in 2011, Singapore’s major museums are all housed in colonial buildings. We can still see colonial influences in permanent exhibitions at the National Museum, such as the natural history drawings commissioned by William Farquhar, the first Resident of Singapore, while he was serving in Melaka, and which were brought back to Singapore in 1995 through a generous purchase and donation by a Singaporean philanthropist, G. K. Goh.³⁹ In the History Gallery of the museum, visitors descend a spiral walkway that opens to a circular wall onto which a six-minute film, *Singapore 360*, is projected. Then, after a display of fourteenth-century Temasik, the timeline jumps to the colonial period, with the gallery divided into eight zones – Arriving, Settlement, Emporium, Port-City, Modern Times, Fortress and Syonan-to, Merdeka and New Nation.⁴⁰ This ‘end of history’ with the birth of the new nation in 1965 has been seen by commentators such as historian Loh Kah Seng as indicative of the government’s control over the historical narrative: ‘The period from 1965 onwards, in the PAP’s view, heralds the “end” of Singapore’s history, when the Old Guard triumphed over adversity and ushered in a period of unmitigated success culminating in the “glorious present”’.⁴¹ Tarulevicz concluded that while ‘the use of museum space for nationalist purposes is well trodden territory for museums the

³⁷ See for example John Clammer, *Singapore: Ideology, Society, Culture* (Singapore: Chopmen Publishers, 1985).

³⁸ Nicole Tarulevicz, "History Making in Singapore: Who Is Producing the Knowledge?". *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009): 409.

³⁹ Mark Frost and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow. *Singapore: A Biography* (Hong Kong and Singapore: Hong Kong University Press and National Museum of Singapore, 2009), 62.

⁴⁰ Iola Lenzi, *National Museum of Singapore Guide*, 62.

⁴¹ Loh Kah Seng, "Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore." *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (1998): 16.

world over...it is notably so in Singapore ...given the limited civil space for alternative readings'.⁴²

This use of exhibitions for social purposes was demonstrated when Lily Kong examined an exhibition of the Jewish community of Singapore, *Settling In: Jewish Life and History in Singapore*, held at the Singapore History Museum (now the National Museum of Singapore) in 1999–2000.⁴³ The Jewish community in Singapore is very small, but, Kong argued, the exhibition served the larger nation-building purpose of reinforcing the ideology of multiculturalism, and, at the same time, acknowledging the contribution of minorities. For Kong, it also 'encapsulated the need to balance religious sensitivities in a multireligious society, and between the secular state of Singapore and its Islamic neighbours'.⁴⁴ She posited that this led to a cautious approach by the curators, with material on local racial and religious interactions being avoided, as was mention of the Holocaust. Instead, a 'cheerful and hopeful' tone was portrayed.⁴⁵

Sociologist Can-Seng Ooi has also argued that Singapore's museums are geared towards governmental social engineering and economic goals as well as being shaped by regional political demands – they 'straddle tourism and social engineering interests'.⁴⁶ Drawing on Edward Said's concepts of Orientalism, Ooi argued that Singapore has responded to tourist misgivings that it has lost its charm and become too modern and western, by 'self-orientalising'. That is, 'orientalist images of Singapore have become a set of discursive resources for the tourism and museum authorities to construct identities for Singapore'.⁴⁷ Singapore's museums 'create their own sets of orientalist discourses' in order to accentuate Singapore's uniqueness in the region and to 'appropriate the tourist orientalist imagination in different ways'.⁴⁸ He argued that the National Museum portrays Singapore as an independent

⁴² Tarulevicz, "History Making in Singapore": 421 and Nicole Tarulevicz, "Between Forgetting and Remembering: Singaporean History and the Singapore History Museum," in *Performing objects: museums, material culture and performance in SouthEast Asia*, ed. Fiona Kerlogue (London: Homiman Museum, 2004), 32.

⁴³ Lily Kong, "Re-presenting the religious: nation, community and identity in museums" *Social and Cultural Geography* 6, no. 4 (2005).

⁴⁴ Kong, "Re-presenting the religious": 499.

⁴⁵ Kong, "Re-presenting the religious": 502.

⁴⁶ Can-Seng Ooi, "Identities, museums, and tourism in Singapore: Think regionally, act locally," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 31, no. 89 (2003): 81.

⁴⁷ Can-Seng Ooi, "Orientalist Imaginations and Touristification of Museums: Experiences from Singapore," *Copenhagen Discussion Papers*, no. 1 (2005): 16.

⁴⁸ Ooi, "Orientalist Imaginations and Touristification of Museums": 2.

and sovereign state besieged by its neighbours; the Asian Civilisations Museum suggests that Singapore has deep ethnic roots which make it Asian; and the Singapore Art Museum portrays Singapore as Southeast Asian and the art centre of the region.⁴⁹

Some community groups and institutions have established small exhibitions or museums themselves. In Chapter Four I noted that many Eurasians stated that they felt ignored or inadequately acknowledged in Singapore's history. The Eurasian Association of Singapore's establishment of its Eurasian Heritage Centre, with three permanent exhibitions ('The Eurasian Showcase', 'Roots of our Community' and 'World War II – The Eurasian Story') is an attempt to claim some legitimacy and space in the national narrative.⁵⁰ The CHIJ Museum can be seen as a similar type of museum – that is, established by the community itself on its own premises, to tell its own institutional history.

The CHIJ Museum

The CHIJ Museum was launched on 25 May 2012, with the stated intention to 'capture and commemorate the humble beginnings of our CHIJ culture and tradition and to recount the challenges that our CHIJ Sisters faced and the wonderful work that they did during CHIJ's founding years'.⁵¹ As with other museums, it was intended to not only bring together and preserve artefacts, but to educate – the *Catholic News* reported a student as saying that 'It helps to educate future generations on our history... (and) will also help us understand our IJ history'.⁵² In this sense, it tells the 'insider' story of the Convent: for the CHIJ and Catholic community of Singapore, or, to use Duncan's terminology, it functions as a preserver of the community's official cultural memory.⁵³

Duncan also noted that museums are 'normally set apart from other structures by their monumental architecture and clearly defined precincts'.⁵⁴ In this case, the museum is located within a multi-purpose building at the CHIJ Toa Payoh Secondary School (the same school

⁴⁹ Ooi, "Identities, museums, and tourism in Singapore": 87-88. See also Emily Stokes-Rees, "Making sense of a Melange: representing cultural citizenship in Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum," *Museum Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (2013).

⁵⁰ Jennani Durai. "New Gallery on Eurasian's Roots Opens." *The Straits Times*, 24 March 2012. See also "Eurasian Heritage Centre", www.eurasians.org.sg, accessed 5 June 2013.

⁵¹ "CHIJ Toa Payoh Launches Museum", *The Catholic News*, 17 June 2012.

⁵² *The Catholic News*.

⁵³ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*: 8.

⁵⁴ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 10.

built on land given by the Government when the Convent was moved from Victoria Street in the 1980s). Although the school can be seen as perhaps fitting a broad definition of ‘monumental architecture’, the museum is not signposted and is located inside the school itself and inside one of the many similar school buildings. It has its own quite impressive space and entrance (see Figure 25 below) but is entered off a busy first-floor walkway along from the Principal’s office. In the walkway, outside of the entrance door, are a number of museum objects and display boards (not shown in the photographs) that operate as a ‘taster’ of what is inside the museum proper. School life goes on around and through these entrance exhibits.



Figure 25 Entrance to CHIJ Museum Source: All photos in this Chapter by author unless otherwise stated and taken in July 2012.

The location of the museum inside a CHIJ school, rather than in a separate building elsewhere, is understandable, as it is by definition a specific collection. It might just as logically have been located within the original Convent site, now CHIJMES, to connect visitors with the history of the site. But the location within a CHIJ school enables complete control over what is displayed and how the story is told. This control and the limited access due to its location mean that it functions more as a private, than a public, museum. Duncan identified the importance of control, since ‘to control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths’.⁵⁵ She also wrote that ‘those who are best prepared to perform (the museum’s) ritual – those who are most able to respond to its various cues – are also those whose identities...the museum ritual most fully confirms’.⁵⁶ Applying these concepts to the CHIJ museum, we see that the school community becomes simultaneously the ‘owners’ of the museum, and also the ‘audience’ for it.

⁵⁵ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 8.

⁵⁶ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 8.

The museum's location within a school means that, regardless of the exhibits themselves, the role of the Convent in the development of education in Singapore is inevitably emphasised. The museum displays are new, modern and multimedia, incorporating not only objects and explanatory panels, but also short videos with recollections from one of the Sisters and from a well-known former pupil. A video tour of the museum is posted on the school website.⁵⁷ The museum's existence and style indicate a community of sufficient affluence to produce a museum of some quality, and its location in the school draws attention to, and reinforces for its audience, the prestige of CHIJ schools in Singapore and their large alumni, who are also part of the intended audience.

Despite this pull towards the educational history of the Convent, the museum also functions, by its very nature, as a religious museum, since it is telling the story of the IJ Sisters and the Town Convent. In addition to the display boards telling the history of the Order and the photographs of nuns, there are numerous religious objects from the Convent, such as a font and crucifix. Museumologist Mark O'Neill has noted that in most museums, religious objects tend to be 'either aestheticized as art icons or treated by curators as evidence of the exotic beliefs of peoples remote in time, place and culture, or as local history objects like any others'.⁵⁸ In the CHIJ museum, the religious artefacts are incorporated into the larger narrative of the Convent and the Convent schools. Duncan noted that material objects 'act as powerful metaphors, material representations of complex beliefs and thoughts'.⁵⁹ The museum's location away from the usual access of the public means that the large majority of visitors will be students, parents and other members of the Catholic community, the group most likely to be able to 'read' the religious meaning of the objects on display.

The same group of visitors is also likely to have an emotional attachment to some of the artefacts familiar to them from their own school days at the Convent, such as the gong that called students to class. Hooper-Greenhill wrote that 'personal experiences can be encoded in artefacts, so that the object represents the memory, the significance and the emotional power of those experiences...Sometimes it is not until the objects of everyday life are no longer part

⁵⁷ See <http://www.chijsec.edu.sg/chijsec/the-chij-museum>, accessed 30 August 2015.

⁵⁸ Mark O'Neill, "Making Histories of Religion." Chap. 16 in *Making Histories in Museums*, edited by Gaynor Kavanagh (London & New York: Leicester University Press, 1996), 189.

⁵⁹ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 13.

of everyday living that they become imbued with meaning'.⁶⁰ So the font on display has a poignancy as it was found in the Convent garden just before redevelopment of the site and was taken home by one of the 'old girls' and cared for until it was donated to the museum. Such items act as physical links to the Convent site.

Hooper-Greenhill examined the National Portrait Gallery, London and noted the importance given to the 'authenticity' of portraits, of having been painted directly from life: 'The portrait itself as a material artefact once occupied the same historical space as the sitter which it represents, and it thereby acted in a metaphysical way to bring the sitter and the present-day viewer into an almost personal contact'.⁶¹ In contrast, performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson, examining the Hull House Museum in Chicago, has written of her disappointment at finding that the letters in the museum that she had initially thought were authentic, were in fact copies, calling it the 'fickle promise of authenticity'.⁶² The CHIJ Museum has a display of nuns' habits, showing the change in the habits over time – they have been newly created and arranged on mannequins (see Figure 26 below).



Figure 26 Display case showing changes to nuns' habits over time

They are useful in that we can visualise the habits; yet, by being necessarily recreated, I argue that their impact is diminished. We know that they are not originals – we are not 'promised' authenticity – and their display on the white mannequins reinforces this 'lifeless' feel. The

⁶⁰Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 109.

⁶¹ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 39.

⁶² Shannon Jackson, *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity* (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 2000), 262-63.

emotional impact of the adjoining display focusing on the CHIJ orphans is much greater, in part because of the inclusion of the children's small chairs – functioning as artefacts (Figure 27 below).



Figure 27 Photo of orphans in the 1950s with display of chairs

The exhibit is a constructed entity. The photograph is a copy of one taken in the 1950s, showing orphans sitting, eating a meal. It is clearly a copy, and it represents just one moment in time, but it also portrays actual orphans. The chairs in front of the photograph are originals. Their tiny size, emphasised by the large size of the photograph behind, give an illusion of authentic reality to the tableau. The height of the chair on the far left of the photograph (see larger photo above) has been raised at some time in the past by adding pieces of wood under the legs so that the chair could be used by children with polio. Its battered paintwork speaks of its considerable use. Here, the copy (the photograph) and the artefact (the chairs) work together in a gestalt sense – the whole is more powerful than the individual parts.

Museumologist Kevin Moore proposed that collections have most impact when they have the ‘triple power of the real’ – real things, real place (even if reconstructed) and real persons.⁶³ The CHIJ Museum has elements of all three: almost all of the artefacts are originals, with many coming from the Victoria Street site; the museum is not located in the original site but its location in the CHIJ school almost stands instead of the real place, at least for the Catholic and CHIJ school communities; and the video vignettes and photo display boards of well-known nuns and ex-students give a connection to ‘real persons’.

⁶³ Kevin Moore, *Museums and Popular Culture* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), 146.

Quill photo exhibition and book

This entwined dualism of Convent and education was also on show at a photo exhibition held in Singapore in November 2012 and in the accompanying book released at the same time. The opening of the museum, along with the publication of a book *Quill: Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus 1662–2012* and an accompanying photo exhibition in November 2012, were all part of the larger world-wide celebrations of the 350th anniversary of the work of the Infant Jesus Sisters. The title, *Quill*, emphasised the religious nature of the commemoration, being taken from the words of the founder of the Order, Father Nicolas Barré (1621-1684), who wrote that a Sister ‘should place herself in the hands of God like a brush in the hand of a painter; like a quill in the hand of a writer’. And, indicative of the explicit rigour and discipline of the time, he continued: ‘And note that a quill, if it is to write well, must often be cut, trimmed and shaped’.⁶⁴

The photo exhibition, ‘*Quill: Convent of the Holy infant Jesus 1662–2012*’, ran for two weeks in November 2012 at the ArtSpace galleries in Keppel Road, Singapore. It had several corporate sponsors, including Canon. The accompanying book of the same name was launched at the exhibition and reproduces much of the same material. Proceeds from book sales go to the IJ Homes and Children’s Centres Mission, the charity that grew out of the Convent Orphanage and Home for Abandoned Babies. A video of the work of the Mission was shown at the exhibition, and visitors could take a pamphlet about the Mission, which included a donation form. Figure 28 below shows part of the exhibition space – of note is the modern gallery-like display arrangements and the somewhat separate space for sitting and viewing the video.



Figure 28 *Quill* exhibition: display and video-viewing

⁶⁴ CHIJ, *Quill*, frontispiece.

A group of former students – with ‘a desire to knit together the many disparate elements of our rich Infant Jesus heritage’ – initiated the exhibition and book.⁶⁵ The committee gathered old photographs of the Convent, conducted interviews, and organised workshops and photography competitions in the eleven CHIJ schools. The exhibition and book contain a selection of these old and new photographs, with most of the new photographs showing school students in class and at play. Maxims from Father Barré and short statements from current nuns and others are interspersed throughout the book and were projected on the walls of the exhibition. If commemorative events are intended to affirm and reinforce memories that provide a sense of heritage and identity⁶⁶, then, like the museum, the Quill exhibition and book are examples of a community defining, or attempting to define, what constitutes their cultural memory.

‘Those Catholic School Days’ walking tour

The cultural memory of the Convent is also communicated to the broader community in other ways. In November 2012, the Preservation of Monuments Board conducted a range of walking tours, led by volunteer guides, as part of its Monument Open House 2012, with the theme of ‘Celebrating our Standing History’.⁶⁷ This included a walking tour of the former St Joseph’s Institution, now the Singapore Art Museum, and the former CHIJ Chapel and Caldwell House, now part of CHIJMES. The tour, called ‘Those Catholic School Days’, encouraged potential participants to ‘explore the gorgeous compounds, relive what school life might have been like and hear about famous alumni who went on to make significant contributions to Singapore’. It thus located the Convent in the colonial setting, while at the same time linking it positively to the development of Singapore over the generations. It is doing the same work as the CHIJ Museum and the Quill exhibition and book described above – ensuring the ongoing prestige of the institution and giving it an appropriate and glorious past.

⁶⁵ CHIJ, *Quill*, 124.

⁶⁶ Warwick Frost and Jennifer Laing, *Commemorative Events: Memory, Identities, Conflicts* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1.

⁶⁷ Preservation of Monuments Board pamphlet: *Monument Open House 2012 17 & 18 November*. I participated in the tour on 17 November.

CHIJMES

A few plaques and display boards appear in the CHIJMES grounds and buildings today⁶⁸ that give some of the history of the site, mostly focused on the Gate of Hope, the chapel (now called CHIJMES Hall) and Caldwell House, but they are minimal. The plain explanatory plaques at the Gate of Hope describe the history of babies being left at the gate (see Figure 29 below).



Figure 29 Plaques at Gate of Hope (external view)

The same plaques also appear on the wall near the interior of the gate, with an additional one in similar style, noting the gate was officially commemorated by the Minister for Information and the Arts and the Minister for Health in 1996. The stone used for the plaques, and the carving and gilding of the inscriptions, are reminiscent of that used in gravestones and give a formal and almost funeral feel. When I visited in December 2011, this feeling was heightened by the posy of flowers placed on the Gate of Hope itself (Figure 30 below).

⁶⁸ This information was correct at my last visit in July 2014. However, as I discuss later in this chapter and in the conclusion, modifications to buildings and the site are regularly made. In March 2015, extensive work on Caldwell House was still in progress.



Figure 30 Flowers placed on the Gate of Hope

The small bunch of flowers was dried up but had a poignancy about it, as if it had been carefully placed there by someone who wanted to remember, perhaps, a specific baby or, more likely, all of the babies who had been left at the gate over the years. The gesture operates at both the personal and institutional level, and is reminiscent of flowers left at the site of a car accident or a grave.

In a metaphoric sense, the flowers are also an echo of the death of the Convent as a site of religious activity and meaning. The Sisters have gone and the traces of their presence fragmentary. Caldwell House, where the Sisters lived, and now a National Monument, is strangely clinical in feel. One ascends the staircase past some historical photographs, but the building is largely unfurnished. Figure 31 below shows the staircase with two of the four photographs on display.



Figure 31 Staircase in Caldwell House

Of the four photographs along and at the top of the staircase, two include people – the photograph of the nun and children in the left of Figure 31, and upstairs, a group photograph of school children posed outside a school building. Another photograph shows the nun's lounge, oddly devoid of people even though a photograph exists which shows the nuns in that lounge in 1934. Figure 32a below shows the framed photograph displayed in CHIJMES, and Figure 32b the potential alternative photograph that could have been chosen.



Figure 32a: Photograph in CHIJMES



Figure 32b: Nuns in lounge, 1934
Source: *C.H.I.J. Victoria Street 1854-1983*

Figure 32b shows the nuns in their black habits, many sitting around a large octagonal wooden table doing needlework or reading. The nun sitting at the small table with the statue may be reading from scripture as they work. Here we have an insight into the ordinary daily life of the nuns and how the space was actually used. Whether we interpret it now as showing warmth and a sense of community, or as the drudgery of sitting in silence producing

needlework for sale, having people in the photograph gives it a vitality lacking in the other, more clinical, photograph.

At the CHIJMES site today, memories of the actual life of the Convent are transitory, glimpsed only briefly as remnants of a former time. The photograph below (Figure 33a) superimposes the past on the present, the Then on the Now. It uses the technique of holding a historic photograph up in exactly the same place where the photograph was originally taken and re-photographing it so that 'you can create a window into past events and the lives of people who've stood on the same ground as you'.⁶⁹



Figure 33a Cloisters joining Caldwell House and Chapel: Then and Now

The original photograph, taken in 1934, shows the Sisters in formal pose outside the entrance to Caldwell House, in the cloisters joining the House and the Chapel. I held the 1934 photograph up in the same location in July 2012. We read the sepia of the original photograph as denoting the past. It stands out against the colour of today, and clearly shows us what is the past and what is the present. Interestingly, if we print the entire Then and Now

⁶⁹ See <https://open.abc.net.au/projects/now-and-then-series-2-44un7gn#/about>, accessed 26 May 2013.

photograph in black and white, as in Figure 33b below, the clear limits of past and present dissolve.



Figure 33b: The Then and Now photograph printed in black and white

In both the colour version and the black and white version, little appears changed. Yet, as John Berger wrote, when we look at a photograph, the photographer has selected that sight ‘from an infinity of other possible sights’.⁷⁰ In this case, by removing the historical photograph, we can see the modern additions to the site (Figures 34a and 34b below).



Figure 34a: Parking attendant



Figure 34b: Information boards & bin

In Figure 34a, we see the small office for the commercial parking attendant that we just glimpsed in Figure 34a. Cars can now park in a purpose-built underground car park, entering

⁷⁰John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 10.

next to Caldwell House and under the adjoining building. In Figure 34b, we can see two display boards, the one most visible being a directory of businesses in the complex.

The questions then become: is it possible to still ‘see’ the remnants of those past lives in the present CHIJMES site? Does repurposing of buildings purge past uses? The large numbers of women in Singapore who attended school at the Convent in Victoria Street mean that memories of the Convent are inevitably overlaid on the buildings and site, despite its repurposing. Faint though the traces may seem for the visitor at the site, we can see that under the layers of new meanings, traces of the old remain when the surface is scraped away. I contend that the original purpose of the Convent chapel was exposed and brought into play in 2012 when the Escape Chapel Party was to take place.

The ‘Escape Chapel Party’

The chapel at CHIJMES, now known as CHIJMES Hall, is regularly hired out by the ‘tenant’, Watabe Wedding Group, for weddings and a range of other corporate events. In April 2012, a Singapore company, Creative Insurgence, hired the chapel on behalf of a UK-based recording label and club brand, Escape Swansea and Escape Recording, ‘Wales’s leading and most influential dance brand’.⁷¹ The UK company, gauging the viability of expanding into Asia, promoted the ‘Escape Chapel Party’ scheduled for Easter Saturday, 7 April 2012, as being a ‘First Time in Asia’ event. Referencing the previous use of the site as a Convent, the party was promoted as ‘a sacrilegious night of partying’, with ‘dancing nuns’. Unsurprisingly, widespread and vocal opposition to the party, from both Catholics and non-Catholics, occurred almost immediately. Several crucial decisions by the organisers caused this opposition, and for Catholics, the coalescence of three factors magnified the offense: the provocative ‘naughty nuns’ publicity, the Holy Saturday date, and the Convent chapel venue.

Publicity

The poster for the event (see Figure 35 below) portrayed a glamorous young white woman wearing a nun’s wimple and veil.

⁷¹ Description from Escape Swansea’s Facebook page.

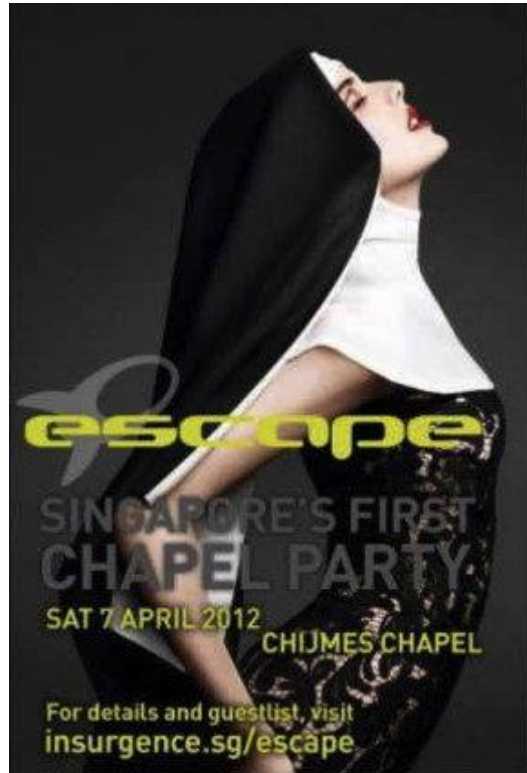


Figure 35: Escape Chapel Party poster Source: Facebook⁷²

The model is also wearing a tight-fitting party dress, her arms exposed. With red lipstick, head tilted back and hands on hips, she assumes the sexually provocative, orgasmic pose so familiar in popular culture imagery. The Facebook promotional page for the event included another two photographs of women in short, costumed 'nun's habits' (see Figures 36a and 36b below).



Figure 36a: Facebook 'nun'



Figure 36b: Facebook 'nuns'⁷³

⁷² Reproduced in Lediati Tan. "Party Theme Riles Catholics." *The New Paper*, 5 April 2012.

Figure 36a again shows a young white woman wearing a short nun costume. Figure 36b shows two young Singaporean women who distributed promotional flyers for the party in nearby shopping centres. The photograph was posted on the Facebook site with accompanying comments from the Director of Creative Insurgence saying, 'It's gonna be a wild night ... with Dancing nuns' and 'A sneak preview of what our girls will be wearing on the 7th of April'. This photograph differs from the others in that it shows two young Asian women. Their ages and their slight builds, I suggest, present a more vulnerable and child-like image. This photograph, in particular, was widely criticised on social media in Singapore. One 24-year-old woman, who had seen the women handing out flyers, was quoted in the media as saying, 'I was shocked and offended that they were allowed to walk around in such an offensive costume'.⁷⁴ Singaporean advertisers in local and international magazines tend to use white models far more than local Asian models, and white models are preferred more frequently when portraying sensuality in advertisements.⁷⁵ The photographs of the young Asian women in the nun costumes went against this usual practice, making the photographs appear more shocking and adding to the public unease about the photographs.

The date

The second problem for the organisers was the intended date of the Chapel Party— Easter Saturday, the day after Good Friday, the day that symbolises the death of Christ, and before Easter Sunday, which symbolises the Resurrection. Creative Insurgence's Director said that the date of the party, during the most holy week of the Christian calendar, was coincidental and was the first available booking date. For the Catholic community, however, this added to the perceived insensitivity to their faith.

The venue

Of the factors that particularly offended Catholics and 'Old Girls', the venue was crucial. Had the party been proposed for a different venue, Catholics might have still felt offended by the

⁷³ Both photos reproduced in Jeanette Tan. "Police Investigate Chijmes 'Chapel Party'." Yahoo News, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/chijmes-'chapel-party'-draws-flak-from-catholic-community.html>.

⁷⁴ Jeanette Tan. "Police Investigate Chijmes 'Chapel Party'." Yahoo News, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/chijmes-'chapel-party'-draws-flak-from-catholic-community.html>, accessed 27 July 2012.

⁷⁵ Katherine Frith, "Commercializing Beauty: A Comparison of Global and Local Magazine Advertisements in Singapore," in *Commercializing Women: Images of Asian Women in the Media*, ed. Katherine Frith and Kavita Karan (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2008), 86.

timing and theme, but the fact that it was to have taken place in the chapel focused and magnified the issue. To go back to the idea of the palimpsest, the memories of the chapel's original use had not gone away in the years since its de-consecration and transformation into the CHIJMES Hall. The proposed party with its nun theme brought the original use of the building as a Catholic chapel to the fore, figuratively stripping away the layers of meaning on the building down to the stones themselves. The memory of that original meaning was still there, as evidenced in a statement from one of the first people, a student, to make an official complaint about the party: 'what really gets my goat is them trying to profiteer off making something sacred into something so offensive and crass...Freedom to hold a function in such a sacred place comes with the responsibility of using it with respect.'⁷⁶

Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh have described Singaporean places of worship and places of burial as 'landscapes of sentiment', which operate at both the personal and communal level to touch deeply held beliefs and sentiments.⁷⁷ The large numbers of 'old girls' in Singapore who attended school at the Convent in Victoria Street meant that memories of the Convent were inevitably overlaid on the buildings and site, despite its repurposing. The use of the chapel for wedding receptions and cultural events had been unchallenged and accepted, but the Escape Chapel Party, with its nun imagery and proposed timing on Holy Saturday, tapped into a deep memory of the building's original use and was seen as a step too far.

Preparations unravel

Opposition to the proposed party intensified. The Catholic Archbishop, Nicholas Chia, considered the publicity to be 'an affront to Catholics'.⁷⁸ He also drew attention to the venue and timing:

The fact that the party was to be held in what was once the CHIJ chapel and on Holy Saturday compounded the disrespect not just to our faith but to the many women religious who have devoted their lives to God and who have contributed greatly to Singapore with their schools, homes and work with the poor.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Tan, "Police investigate CHIJMES chapel party", quoting Jean Seah.

⁷⁷ Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscape in Singapore: Constructions of "Nation"* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 4.

⁷⁸ "Archbishop's Message on Chijmes Chapel Party Issue." *The Catholic News*, 22 April 2012.

⁷⁹ "Archbishop's Message on CHIJMES Chapel Party Issue".

Catholics, many of whom are alumni from the eleven CHIJ schools, make up about 7 per cent of the Singaporean population.⁸⁰ In addition, many non-Catholics are alumni, or parents of children currently attending the schools, and are likely to be sympathetic to Catholic values. An online Yahoo Poll asked whether the Party should still go ahead: of the 1,103 respondents,⁶⁴ per cent of respondents voted that it should not, as it was 'an insult to the religion and its followers', and 13 per cent thought that it should go ahead only if 'they ensure that it will not disrespect a religion'.⁸¹ It is unclear how many of the respondents were Catholic, although Yahoo! Singapore said, 'Non-Catholic Singaporeans whom (we) spoke to reflected divided opinions on the issue as well, with some agreeing with the Catholics who were offended, and others saying that the party should go on'.⁸²

Complaints were made to the police that organisers were violating the Sedition Act, which prohibits insulting or denigrating any racial group or religion in Singapore. Complaints were also made to the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, and the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts.⁸³ Assistant Professor of Law Jack Lee was asked by the media for his opinion of the potential prosecution under the Sedition Act. He considered that the advertisement for the party technically fell within the definition of uttering seditious words or publishing a seditious publication, since a seditious tendency under the Act is defined as one that 'raise(s) discontent...among the citizens of Singapore or the residents in Singapore'. The *intention* behind its creation was not relevant.⁸⁴ The Ministry of Home Affairs released a statement saying there was 'no excuse' for behaviour that insulted or denigrated any religion. It suggested that Creative Insurgence could have breached one of the conditions of its licence to use the Chapel and that it could be liable to sanction.⁸⁵ The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs, Teo Chee Hean, when interviewed on television said creative

⁸⁰ Department of Statistics, "Singapore Census of Population 2010," (Singapore: Government of Singapore, 2011). As a percentage of the total population of residents, aged 15 years and over.

⁸¹ Yahoo! News, 4 April 2012. <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/poll--should-the--chapel-party--still-go-on-html>, accessed 27 September 2013. Also 20% voted 'Yes, live and let live. Halloween parties have nun costumes anyway' and 3% 'cannot relate to this'.

⁸² Yahoo! News.

⁸³ Tan, "Police investigate CHIJMES 'Chapel Party'".

⁸⁴ Tan, "Police investigate CHIJMES 'Chapel Party'".

⁸⁵ Jeanette Tan. "Police Investigate Chijmes 'Chapel Party'." Yahoo News, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/chijmes-'chapel-party'-draws-flak-from-catholic-community.html>.

organisations must be mindful of ‘social sensitivities’: ‘This is a multi-racial society, multi-religious society. Go out and have fun but don’t do it at other people’s expense.’⁸⁶

In response to the wave of concerns about the event, the company managing the CHIJMES complex intervened. Its lawyers informed the tenant, Watabe Weddings, that it should take immediate steps to stop the party going ahead. Faced with this opposition and the cancellation of the event by CHIJMES management, the director of Creative Insurgence wrote to the Archbishop, apologising and saying that no offence had been intended and that the incident was a reminder of ‘the need for mutual respect for all religions in our multi-racial country’.⁸⁷

Dressed for controversy

In using the nun image to promote the Chapel Party, the organisers tapped into symbolism deeply imbedded in Western culture, both religious and secular. Historian Elizabeth Kuhns has written that the nun’s habit is ‘one of the most widely known and recognizable religious symbols of our time, an icon deeply embedded in our cultural consciousness’ and ‘a metaphor for the Catholic Church itself’.⁸⁸ Historically, the habit signified ‘the dedication of the body to the heavenly Spouse’.⁸⁹ Art Historian Helen Hills has posited that it was the veil that was paramount symbolically, since it ‘both obscured the nun’s sight as it hid her face from view and rendered the nun metonymically the altar of sacrifice’.⁹⁰ She further argued, however, that

it also became a sign in itself, an acknowledgment of the beauty and temptation of the nun’s face beneath it. Thus, in truly Foucauldian fashion, the practice of veiling signified the sexual allure of the veiled enclosed nun.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Interview, Channel News Asia, 7 April 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA5OIKNP581>, accessed 15/02/13.

⁸⁷ Jeanette Tan. "Police Investigate Chijmes 'Chapel Party'." Yahoo News, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/chijmes-chapel-party-draws-flak-from-catholic-community.html>.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Kuhns, *The Habit: A History of the Clothing of Catholic Nuns* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 8. See also Rebecca Sullivan, "Breaking Habits: Gender, Class and the Sacred in the Dress of Women Religious." In *Consuming Fashion: Adorning the Transnational Body*, edited by Anne Brydon and Sandra Niesson (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

⁸⁹ Helen Hills, *Invisible City: The Architecture of Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan Convents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 170.

⁹⁰ Hills, *Invisible City*, 171

⁹¹ Hills, *Invisible City*, 171

This is the paradox of the veiled nun – she ‘seems both less than female but greater than human’⁹², yet at the same time ‘the image, the idea, of a nun brings together three powerful elements: God, women, and sex’.⁹³ In the poster advertising the party, the skimpiness of the dress and the model’s pose emphasised the erotic and so was at odds with the religious symbolism of the nun ‘sealed in chastity’.⁹⁴ The Facebook photographs of the ‘naughty nuns’ are reminiscent of the whip-wielding nun popular in pornography in the Victorian Age, and the ‘naughty nun’ costume remains available and popular today.⁹⁵ In using the images of the ‘naughty nun’, the Escape Chapel promotional material juxtaposed and mingled all of these deep and powerful Christian and Western tropes.

Somewhat surprisingly, the director of the Creative Insurgence told the media, ‘we would like to clarify that the images contained no religious symbolism’, and that this also applied to ‘teasers that said nuns will be at the party – we meant the secularised, costume version that contains no religious symbolism’.⁹⁶ The Archbishop undoubtedly expressed the incredulity of most Catholics when he responded with, ‘What are the nun’s habit and the rosary if not Catholic?’⁹⁷ Yet the issue may be somewhat more complex, as material culture can have a number of meanings. The Christian cross, for example, is both a deeply religious symbol for Christians, as well as, for some wearers, solely a fashionable piece of jewellery. In this sense, ‘modern’ and ‘Western’ have become conflated, and the iconography of religious items is forgotten or relegated to the past.

The reading of material culture also presupposes some measure of familiarity with the culture from which objects arise. I suggest that in a multi-racial, multi-religious country such as Singapore, we cannot assume that the religious symbols of one faith will be understood by those of another faith, or of no faith. In her historical and architectural analysis of an Italian church, writer Margaret Visser wrote that ‘in churches, especially Roman Catholic churches, I am a “native”, and a lot of what is going on I have known since childhood’.⁹⁸ She recounted

⁹² Kuhns, *The Habit*, 8.

⁹³ Mary Gordon, "Women of God," *Atlantic Monthly*, January (2002): 66.

⁹⁴ Hills, *Invisible City*, 170.

⁹⁵ Kuhns, *The Habit*, 130.

⁹⁶ Jeanette Tan. "Police Investigate Chijmes 'Chapel Party'." Yahoo News, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/chijmes-'chapel-party'-draws-flak-from-catholic-community.html>.

⁹⁷ "Archbishop's Message on Chijmes Chapel Party Issue." *The Catholic News*, 22 April 2012.

⁹⁸ Margaret Visser, *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery and Meaning in an Ordinary Church* (Toronto: Harper Perennial), 2000, 3.

seeing a guide showing a Japanese tourist around a church in Spain, pointing out the superb stone vaulting:

The tourist did not even raise his head to look at this. He stared aghast – as well he might – at a horrific, life-sized painted carving of a bleeding man nailed to two pieces of wood. When the guide stopped talking, the man gestured wordlessly towards the statue.⁹⁹

The guide, Visser tells us, nodded, smiled, and told him in which century it had been carved – that is, the statue of the crucified Christ was so familiar to the guide that he or she did not realise that the Japanese tourist saw it, not as a religious symbol, but rather as the figure of a person being tortured. We can miss the significance of things if we do not have the specific cultural knowledge, and perhaps this was also a factor at work in the ill-fated Chapel Party.

Just one week after the controversy over the Chapel Party, another religious group was offended by a model wearing religious robes. The Floral Designers Society Singapore (FDSS) had held a fashion show during a gala dinner in March and later, in April, posted a photograph from the show of one of the models wearing a red Taoist priest's robe and carrying a 'ruyi', a sceptre used by Taoist priests to represent sincerity and longevity.¹⁰⁰ Media reports drew parallels between the Chapel Party upset and the Taoist robe controversy, since both had invoked similar issues of religious sensitivity and harmony. As I have argued elsewhere, there is a heightened sense of the fragility of religious harmony in Singapore, with racial harmony and religious harmony conflated.¹⁰¹ Singapore is constitutionally a secular state but has chosen to broker perceived religious conflicts under the banner of maintaining religious harmony in society. In this scenario, the state acts as the 'neutral' arbitrator, since religious disharmony is viewed as leading to racial disharmony, and, therefore, to conflict, which could imperil the state.

The Chapel Party controversy also demonstrates that in a city of constant change, repurposing of a building does not always wipe away memories of the original use. Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong have argued that places can remain significant for individuals because they are repositories of memory, and that communal sites 'are similarly textured by multiple

⁹⁹ Visser, *The Geometry of Love*, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Lee Xin En, "Taoists upset over priest's robe worn at fashion show", *Straits Times*, 10 April 2012. See also Lee Xin En, "Taoist robe in fashion show sparks furor", *Straits Times*, 12 April 2012.

¹⁰¹ Sandra Hudd, "What are the Rosary and Nun's Habit if not Catholic? The Chapel Party Controversy in Singapore," *Limina* 20, no. 1 (2014).

layers of everyday meanings and sedimented history. When personalised and collectivised meanings intersect, place meanings are augmented'.¹⁰² Architects and urban geographers have in recent years come to apply the word 'palimpsest' to buildings. Literature theorist Andreas Huyssen, in his book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsest and the Politics of Memory*, noted that 'we have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests of space'.¹⁰³ He argued that there is an 'urban imaginary', which 'in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of what was there before, imagined alternatives to what there is. The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses and heterotopias'.¹⁰⁴

The chapel of the former Convent is well known to many Singaporeans, many of whom attended school at the site. The controversy over the party with its nun imagery showed that deconsecration of the chapel did not totally erase its religious meaning and the transition from the sacred to the secular was not fully achieved. Faint though the traces may seem for the casual visitor at the site, under the layers of new meanings, traces of the old remain when the surface is scraped away. This palimpsest was exposed and brought into play in 2012 when the Escape Chapel Party was proposed to take place. Despite re-purposing of the Convent site, its original meaning remained in the community's memory and was defended when the Chapel Party organisers were seen as disrespecting that memory. The Party inadvertently brought to the fore the original use of the building as a Catholic chapel– the layers of meaning on the building were figuratively stripped away down to the stones themselves. The memory of that original meaning was and is still there, even if it does not usually surface so starkly.

Still contested? The Convent walls and other makeovers

In June 2013, the Urban Redevelopment Authority announced a \$43 million dollar 'facelift' for CHIJMES.¹⁰⁵ The URA spokesman noted that 'CHIJMES last underwent major works in 1996, and the buildings have since become worn'. The planned changes included covered walkways, a glass pavilion, a glass ceiling over the current sunken courtyard, the removal of cobblestones, and the lifting of the roofs of the cloister walkways and replacing them with

¹⁰² Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, eds., *Portrait of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995), 14.

¹⁰³ Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*: 7.

¹⁰⁴ Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Natasha Zachariah. "Chijmes a-Changing." *Straits Times*, 22 June 2013.

glass. The chapel would be kept open during the day, and a video about the history of the site would be played inside. Some artefacts from the CHIJ Museum at Toa Payoh would be brought on a rotating basis to CHIJMES, and a historic walking trail would be created.

Yeo Kang Shua and Terence Chong of the Singapore Heritage Society called for public discussion on the changes, posing the question, 'Can a national monument like CHIJMES retain its social meaning when its architectural integrity is compromised?'¹⁰⁶ They pointed to the lowering of the boundary wall as destroying the cloister's *raison d'être* and argued that 'although physical segregation is retained, the essence of a cloister is lost'. While some criticisms such as those above were raised, the developers had also sought feedback from the CHIJ Alumni Association. The president, Dr Claire Ang, was reported in the *Straits Times* as saying: 'There were concerns because the walls gave the place a bit of mystery but people didn't know that it was accessible, so now that will change'.¹⁰⁷ She also stated:

They did their homework and the proposal was good. It is now a platform for us to show younger generations where we started. There are questionable establishments in there but we can't dictate what goes in. But as old girls, we hope that the tenants will respect the history.

Following these changes, the external Convent wall along Victoria Street was modified, with just 80 centimetres of the original wall retained, wrought-iron grilles fitted in the remains, and new entrances created along the wall. The changes to the wall were to give a more 'open' feeling, which the developers hope will attract more visitors. The chairman of the Lei Garden Restaurant, a long-term tenant, stated that the changes to the walls will 'give more visibility and accessibility...The complex will be more vibrant and inviting'.¹⁰⁸ Figure 37 below shows the frontage after the modifications to the wall.

¹⁰⁶ Yeo Kang Shua, and Terence Chong. "Holes in the Heritage Conservation Wall." *Today*, 11 July 2013.

¹⁰⁷ *Straits Times*, 22 June 2013.

¹⁰⁸ *Straits Times*, 22 June 2013.



Figure 37: Victoria Street streetscape after wall modifications, July 2014
Source: Author

Symbolically, the renovation of the Convent walls represents another tension between the original purpose of the site as a convent and its current re-purposing as an entertainment/lifestyle complex. As I argued in Chapter Three, the Convent walls kept the children safe from the dangers of running onto the streets, but they also had social meaning. They acted as an indication that one went into the Convent and entered a slightly different space where the outside world was left behind and other forces operated. That is, they occupied a liminal space between the secular and the holy. Traditionally, as Hills has expounded:

The fortress-like appearance of Convents strengthened and urbanized discourses of chastity. Emphasis on enclosure and separation, both inside the Conventual church and out, visibly forged segregation and exclusivity in relation to the laypeople and implied – while simultaneously obscuring – the nun’s intimacy with the Divine.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Hills, *Invisible City*, 181.

When I visited in July 2014, other planned modifications had been completed. Figure 38a below shows the new fountain and glassed veranda near the chapel. Figure 38b shows the new covered walkway and glass-fronted bars at the rear of the property.



Figure 38a: New fountain and glass veranda

Figure 38b: Covered walkway and bars

Source: Author

Yeo and Chong concluded that ‘the CHIJMES boundary wall issue plugs into the wider debate over the upkeep and maintenance of our national monuments’.¹¹⁰ It also plugs into the debate about how the past is remembered. In the case of the Convent site, the tension between conserving heritage and re-purposing as a commercial enterprise is continually being stretched. In July 2014, the nun’s parlour in Caldwell House was being ‘renovated’. The precarious nature of this can be seen in Figure 39 below.

¹¹⁰ *Today*, 11 July 2013.



Figure 39: Nun's parlour under modification, July 2014 Source: Author

We can see the words '*Marche en ma presence et sois parfait*' still around the walls of the parlour, yet the emptied room and the workmen portray the vulnerability of the structure.

The sense of history at CHIJMES will certainly be enhanced by the artefacts returning from the CHIJ Museum and the creation of a video and historic walk, yet the danger of too many significant structural changes to the buildings is that the visitor is left with little more than the artefacts and constructed histories. As I noted in Chapter Seven, sociologist James Loewen, critical of historic sites in the USA, commented that 'sometimes the historical marker becomes more important than the site itself. If the place has changed, the plaque offers something to see, a way to connect with the event'.¹¹¹ That is, there is a danger that the plaque becomes all that remains to be seen. This is a particular challenge for Singapore, as I

¹¹¹ James Loewen, *Lies across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: Touchstone), 2000, 27.

examined in previous chapters, given the extent to which the Singapore Story is bound up with economic progress. In this latest redevelopment of the Convent site, we see this tension between heritage conservation and economic progress played out again.

On my visit, work was continuing on the modifications to the courtyard, and large billboards were in place to screen off the worksite. They were covered in large colourful drawings of how the site would eventually look. Figures 40a and 40b below show two of the billboards.



Figure 40a and 40b: Billboards around worksite, July 2014 Source: Author

Figure 40a depicts a couple taking a ‘selfie’ while an orchestra performs in the foreground of the chapel. Figure 40b shows a small group in front of the new glass veranda, enjoying a cup of coffee. The colours are muted pastels and the surroundings are serene and manicured. These images portray, I suggest, imagined uses for the site that are remarkably similar to those of the 1990 tender document examined in Chapter Six.¹¹² That is, a somewhat ‘refined’ space, an oasis in the city. Ironically, in Figure 41 below, we can see that the billboards also portray the constantly changing cityscape, the Singapore where ongoing construction is always ‘business as usual’.

¹¹² Urban Redevelopment Authority, *CHIJ: Renewing an Old Masterpiece* (Singapore: URA, 1990).



Figure 41: Billboard at CHIJMES, July 2014

Source: Author

The image reminds us of Cherian George's suggestion that Singapore's T-shirts should read 'Singapore: Work in Progress', since there is constant upgrading and re-invention, the cost of which is an 'unsettling impermanence'.¹¹³

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the tensions over how the Convent is remembered today. As we have seen, memorialising can be both formal and institutionalised, as well as informal and intangible. Two of the Convent buildings are National Monuments, a formal and official signifier of national memory-making. The CHIJ Museum, the *Quill* book and exhibition, and the Walking Tour are other examples of a formal remembering, a telling of the institutional history, largely from an insider perspective. Yet as the response to the Escape Chapel Party tells us, memories of the Convent are also more widespread, intangible and emotional. If we think of buildings as palimpsests, the original use can still at times surface from under the other layers of later use.

The 2014 further redevelopment of CHIJMES demonstrates again the ongoing tension in Singapore between heritage conservation and the modern global city. Political scientist

¹¹³ Cherian George, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control 1990-2000* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2000), 189-90.

Michael Barr and sociologist Zlatko Skrbis have argued that Singapore is a nation in ‘perpetual constructionist mode’: there is a fixation on tangible acts of material construction of buildings and infrastructure, since the government’s control is predicated on the idea that everything in Singapore works; and a continuing construction of policies and ideology, so that the ruling elite’s vision is accepted by the population and dominates at all levels.¹¹⁴ The Hokkien word *kiasu* is often used to describe Singaporeans’ fear of not being the best, of losing out to others, and, as Chris Hudson has suggested, it is not only individuals who are *kiasu*, but the nation itself is driven by the same ethos.¹¹⁵ This commitment to economic ‘progress’ has meant, as George proposed, that ‘Singapore will never be finished’.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Michael Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 11-12.

¹¹⁵ Chris Hudson, *Beyond the Singapore Girl: Discourses of Gender and Nation in Singapore* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2013), 31.

¹¹⁶ George, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation*, 190.

Conclusion

No more silent nights

The advertising for the 2014 Christmas period at CHIJMES shows young people partying and promises that ‘it’s not going to be a silent night at CHIJMES this Christmas’ (Figure 42 below).



Figure 42: CHIJMES advertising for Christmas 2014 Source: website¹

It has some elements, although with more subtlety, of the imagery of the Chapel Party analysed in the previous chapter – the three women in the photograph on the right are wearing short cocktail dresses, and at least two of them look European. It is aspirational: come and drink champagne and have fun with other beautiful young people.

The imagery, in tropical Singapore, is deeply European. The use of the words ‘silent night’ conjures up the traditional Christmas carol, first penned in Austria and usually associated with European Christmas cards showing mountains and snow. In lieu of snow, the young people in the photograph on the left are blowing bubbles, creating a snow-like effect. It assumes a cultural familiarity with European Christmas popular culture, so that viewers can

¹ www.chijmes.com.sg/christmas/, accessed 28 November 2014.

‘read’ the symbolic connection, another legacy of colonialism. In the same way, the promotion also references the Convent’s past in the use of ‘silent night’, conjuring up images of nuns in silent prayer, and perhaps the Catholic midnight mass. It uses this to say what will *not* be – it will not be quiet or, by inference, sedate and boring. In this way, the history of the site as a Convent is simultaneously absent and present. It reminds us again of the continuing layers of meaning being added – and resurfacing – at the site.

Thesis summary

This thesis has covered a wide span of years, from the arrival of Raffles in 1819 to the present. It started by examining the British Empire, broadly, and the roles of women and missionaries as part of the imperial apparatus, using these themes as a framework in which to place the development of Singapore and the Convent. This understanding of the historical development of both was important in itself but also because we need this perspective to understand later developments. I then moved on to the major historical shifts of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore during World War Two, and the subsequent decolonisation and independence of Singapore. The rapid economic and urban development imperatives of the new nation led to the government acquisition of the Convent site in the 1980s and the consequent tender process for its commercial development, which I examined in detail. The two remaining chapters showed how the past is remembered in Singapore through the designation of National Monuments, and then how the Convent itself is remembered. This overall chapter structure was crucial to my argument, as it is through this structure that I have shown and highlighted the interwoven histories of Singapore and the Convent and the palimpsests of meaning that still remain.

In the literature review of Chapter One, I discussed empire – and the British Empire in particular – since colonialism is integral to all stages of Singapore’s development, and its legacies are apparent today. I then drew attention to how missionaries have been portrayed as agents of empire and showed that a more complex picture of their role is emerging. I also drew attention to the relative paucity of research on the role of Catholic nuns as missionaries and noted that this is particularly so in the British (and hence Protestant) empire. I reviewed the Singapore Studies literature to show that the sudden independence of Singapore in 1965 formed a narrative of Singapore exceptionalism and crisis that helped to entrench the political

hegemony of the PAP and, thus, its policies of developmentalism, initially at the expense of heritage conservation.

Chapter Two detailed the early development of Singapore from 1819 until the arrival of the Sisters in 1854 to show that its foundation by the British East India Company as a ‘free port’ led, not only to a *laissez-faire* approach to trade, but also to a similar tolerance for religious missions. The CHIJ was, therefore, able to be established and quickly became a ‘modernising’ influence with its women’s refuge, orphanage and girls’ school. Chapter Three traced the establishment of the Convent in more detail to show that, as the British were bringing ‘order’ to the colonial landscape and its population, the nuns were also ordering society and attempting to inculcate the students with a Western understanding of ‘modernity’. Nonetheless, issues of gender, race and class intersected in the Convent to reveal an institution that both reinforced and challenged colonial norms. I ended the chapter at the Fall of Singapore in 1942 because the Japanese Occupation disrupted and changed Singaporean society and was a moment of rupture for the Convent as well.

Chapter Four examined the adaptation and survival of the Convent during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore in World War Two, including the exodus of many of the Sisters and orphans to the ill-fated farming settlement of Bahau. The Convent in Victoria Street managed to continue to operate in some form throughout the Occupation, although with difficulty and a very changed routine. In a sense, the Convent’s ordering of society was now in the service of a new empire – the Japanese –although not willingly or enthusiastically. The movement to Bahau highlighted the vulnerability of food supplies in an island that had previously relied on its port to import goods, rather than agriculture to produce it. I then moved on to recovery after the war and noted that the war had brought disenchantment with the British, and independence came to be seen as possible.

In Chapter Five, I explored the sense of urgency and crisis in the newly independent nation and the eventual compulsory acquisition of the Convent site for urban redevelopment. I examined the post-colonial period of urgent economic and housing development to show that Singapore was changing physically and socially, and the hegemony of the PAP government was becoming entrenched. This pragmatic developmentalism was another form of ‘modernity’ and, at least initially, heritage conservation was not a consideration. The colonial centre

began to change as the population moved to the new suburbs, and, ultimately, schools such as CHIJ moved with them as the city was reconceptualised and remade.

In Chapter Six, I analysed the tender document issued by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) to potential developers and argued that it portrayed both an imagined future for the site and an imagined past. This document has not been studied before, and I used it to shed new light on the way the reuse of the heritage buildings of the Convent – and, hence, the future Singapore – was being conceptualised in a globalised ‘modern’ city space. I argued that it represented the new nation taking charge of its own physical space and configuring the colonial space anew.

In Chapter Seven, I analysed the gazetted National Monuments and designated heritage sites to show how Singapore is conceptualising and commemorating its past. I examined how, unlike many former colonies, the colonial past is officially recognised as a foundational part of the nation’s history, and that this is reflected in the choice of buildings as monuments. I used the restored Raffles Hotel as an example of the government’s policies of commercial reuse of monuments and their central role in tourism promotion. I then examined the themed area of Little India and how its makeover as a key tourist site has diminished its use for local residents and raised issues about authenticity. I also explored issues of place and argued that the destruction of heritage buildings and the constant change in the built environment has led to feelings of loss and dislocation for many Singaporeans, as well as a nostalgia for the past.

Finally, in Chapter Eight, I detailed how the Convent is remembered today in both the institutional history and at the site. I used the concept of the palimpsest to argue that some tangible layers of the original use of the site remain, although new uses are continuously overlaid. I examined the CHIJ Museum to show that it functions as a preserver of the official cultural memory of the CHIJ community, combining both a religious and community history. I also showed that other acts of memorialisation, such as the ‘Those Old Catholic School Days’ walking tour and the 2012 exhibition ‘Quill’ and its associated book, are also defining and perpetuating the institutional history. Finally, I looked at the CHIJMES site itself to see what traces of the Convent’s past remain there. I argued that the memory of past use of the site came to the forefront in the widespread community opposition to a planned Chapel Party scheduled to be held in the CHIJMES chapel on Easter Saturday 2012. In a Singapore that is

constantly changing, I also revisited the site to report on the changes that have taken place just over the duration of writing this thesis, demonstrating the constant change of the cityscape.

Future research directions

My research on the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus contributes to filling gaps in the historiography of women as missionaries and, more specifically, the role of French Catholic nuns in an Anglican colony. A rich and valuable primary source for further research on the Convent is analysis of the handwritten diaries, the *Annals de Singapour*, which recorded Convent activities from 1851 to 1971. Microfilm copies are available at the National Archives of Singapore but, unfortunately, have not been made available as yet for researchers to study.

In focusing on their activities over the decades and the eventual redevelopment of the Convent site into CHIJMES, I have also shown the usefulness of the approach of focusing on one group of buildings as a site to tell a larger story of national development. A different building would have a different story to recount and would usefully shine light on other aspects of Singapore's history. Alternatively, the impact of Catholic nuns in, for example, former Indochina, could also usefully be examined by a focus on a particular building or buildings.

Conclusion

This thesis contributes to the broader discussions about empire and Christianity by drawing attention to, and examining, the impact of Catholic nuns in a British (and hence Protestant) colony. I have traced the development of the Convent site in Victoria Street over the decades and shown how the work of the Sisters both influenced Singapore's development and was itself influenced by it. It is, in this sense, at the intersection of European and Indigenous history. Its transformation from a wholly European institution into something more quintessentially Singaporean offers an example that troubles some of the dichotomies about colonialism and about missionaries. It also has demonstrated that the colonisation and decolonisation of Singapore has differed from that of many other colonies, and that its colonial legacy is still evident today in its development and national narrative.

It has also shown that while operating within the cloister, the Sisters were a modernising influence and made an important contribution to the ordering and development of the wider society, which is still acknowledged today. The contribution of the CHIJ to the development of Singaporean society pre- and post-independence is potentially an important addition to the historiography of Singapore as part of the forthcoming celebrations of nationhood taking place in August 2015 on the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Republic of Singapore.

The fiftieth anniversary, a particular scholarly moment in thinking about the nation and ascribing meaning, is promoted in Singapore as 'SG50', with a logo based on the 'little red dot that we've come to know as home ... signifying that our dreams are not limited by the physical size of our island nation'.² A tangible build-up to this during 2015 includes an extensive program of events, opportunities for Singaporeans to contribute memories and photos, and the public nomination of places for inclusion on the SG Heart Map. It is a touchstone moment for reflecting on the nation's past and future. So, too, was the death of Lee Kuan Yew in March 2015. The public outpouring of grief reflected his widely perceived pivotal role in the independence struggle and the development of the Republic of Singapore. Although he left politics in 1990, Lee's recent death has come to symbolise the end of an era and a 'passing of the baton' to a younger generation of leaders. In this liminal moment, the Convent's place in helping to make Singapore what it is today is an important part of the historical jigsaw, particularly pertinent to the thousands of Singaporean women who attended the CHIJ schools and to the parents of such children. This makes the history and influence of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus an important adjunct to the more traditional history of Singapore, enriching it by adding a different perspective and focus.

² www.singapore50.sg/SG50/About, accessed 23 June 2015.

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